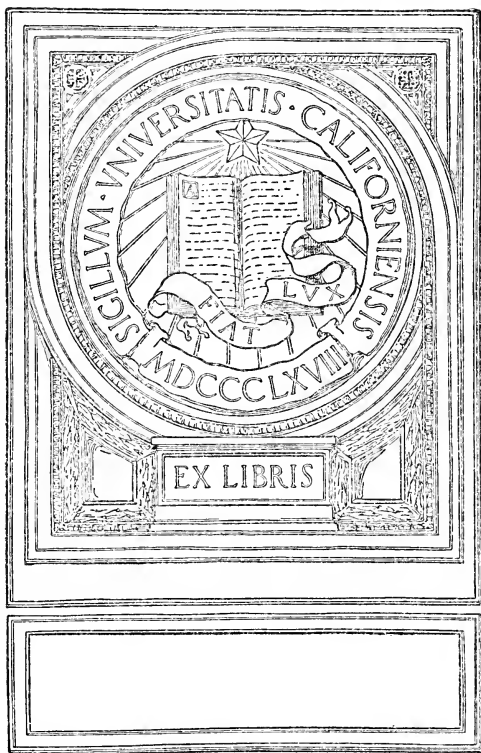


The Last Straw

HAROLD TITUS





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THE LAST STRAW



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By HAROLD TITUS

Author of
"Bruce of the Circle A,"
"I - Conquered," etc.



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CHAPTER I

THE NEW BOSS

THE last patches of snow, even in the most secluded gulches, had been licked up by the mounting sun; the waters of Coyote Creek had returned to the confines of the stream bed; in places a suggestion of green was making its appearance about the bases of grass clumps, and cottonwood buds were swelling. Four men sat on the bench before the bunkhouse of the H. C. ranch; one was braiding a belt, another whittling and two more, hats over their eyes to shield them from the brilliant light, joined in the desultory conversation from time to time.

In the pauses, such as the one now prevailing, was something besides the spirit of idling. Dad Hepburn, gray of hair, eye and mustache, but with the body of a young man, who sat nearest the doorway, glanced frequently towards the road as though expecting to see another come that way to bring fresh interest; Two-Bits Beal was uneasy and did not remain long in one pose, as men do who sit in the first real warmth of spring for its own sake; Jimmy Oliver, the whittler, stopped now and then and held his head at an angle, as if listening; and although he worked industriously at the belt it was evident that Tom Beck had thought for other affairs.

"So she was his nephew an' only heir," commented Two-Bits, gravely. Hepburn stirred and snorted softly. Jimmy Oliver looked at the homely, freckle-blotched face of the

gaunt speaker and grinned. After a moment Tom Beck said:

"Two-Bits, for a smart man you know less than anybody I ever encountered! When I first set eyes on you, I said to myself, 'That man ain't real. He's no work of God A'mighty. Some of these *hombres* that draw cartoons for newspapers got him up.' But I thought you must have brains, seein' you're so powerful low on looks. You're a good cowhand and a first rate horse handler, but won't you ever get anything in your head but those things? Or did this cartoonist make a mistake an' put your kidneys in your skull?"

"Niece; *niece!* Not nephew!"

"Have it your way," Two-Bits said in his high voice, swallowing so his immense Adam's apple shot up half the extraordinary length of his lean throat toward his pointed chin, and slipped back again with a jerk. "I was half right, wasn't I? She's his only heir, ain't she? You can't ask a man to be more 'n half right, can you?"

"If his heir'd been a nephew instead of a niece, we wouldn't all be settin' here so anxious about this arrival," opined Jimmy. "An' we wouldn't all be wonderin' if we was goin' to work for a squaw outfit. It'll be a relief when this lady lands in our midst. Mebby there'll be less speculating and more work done."

"You're right," assented Dad, and pulled at his mustache. "There's a lot to do."

Tom Beck began to whistle softly and the older man glanced sideways at him uneasily; then fixed his eyes on the road.

"I'll bet two bit," volunteered Two-Bits, "that she's as homely as Tom claims I am an' about as pleasant as a hod full of bumble bees."

No one demonstrated interest in his offer and, as though he had not even heard it, Beck said:

"Seems to me there's been a lot goin' on lately, Dad. Or did you mean there was a lot *more* to do?"

"I don't remember such awful activity," the other replied. "'Course, there's been —"

"Nobody ever located those four mares an' their colts, did they? And the last we heard about that bunch of white faces they was headed towards Utah with a shod horse trailing 'em."

Hepburn changed what started as an impatient exposition into a sharp sigh and relieved himself by stabbing a spur into the hard ground.

"Yes, there has been stealin'," he admitted. "There's been a lot of it. But who could do anything? The old man had been slack for years and in the last months before the end he just let go entire. He wouldn't even give anybody else authority enough to have any say; didn't even have a foreman. That's why horses an' cattle have been stole from him.

"'Course, there's been more devil to pay since he died than went on before, but when a man leaves things in a lawyer's hands and the lawyer won't even look in on the job, what you goin' to do?"

His manner was as benevolent as it was deliberate and he turned a paternal smile on Beck.

"Let the thievin' go merrily on, I expect," the other said, giving the leather strips a series of sturdy jerks to tighten the mesh.

"I expect you'd like to be foreman, wouldn't you, Dad?" Two-Bits asked innocently, whereupon Hepburn certified the accuracy of that surmial by moving uneasily. "You'd make a fair foreman . . . *fair*. Now Tommy here," he continued, oblivious of the older man's discomfiture and the delighted smiles of the others, "would make a fine foreman if he'd only give a damn. But he don't . . . he don't. It's too bad, Tommy, you don't settle down and amount to somethin'. You're the best hand in this country!"

Beck lifted his face and sniffed loudly.

"The smell of your bouquet is about as delicate as your diplomacy, Two-Bits!" he said.

Another pause. Beck resumed his whistling and Hepburn devoted his attention to the road. Once he looked at the other from the tail of his eye and a flicker of ill temper showed in his broad, grizzled face.

"Her name's Jane, ain't it?" Two-Bits was an ardent conversationalist. "Jane Hunter! I knowed a school marm named Hunter onct. She was worse 'n thunder for sourin' milk.

"I'll bet —"

"Listen!"

Oliver held up his knife in gesture and Two-Bits stopped talking. The sounds of an approaching wagon were clearly audible.

"I'll bet it's the mail instead of —"

"You lose," muttered Hepburn, getting to his feet as a buckboard swung around the bend.

"An' she sure's come to stay!" from Jimmy as he closed his knife with an air of finality.

The body of the wagon was piled high with trunks and bags and beside the driver sat a very small woman. That she was not of the west, not the sort of woman these men had been accustomed to deal with, was evident from the clothes she wore, but at least one of them remarked that she was not wholly without the qualities essential to the frontier for, when the driver dropped down to open the gate, he gave her the reins to the lathered, excited horses which had brought her from the railroad. As soon as the gate swung open they sprang forward, but she put her weight on the reins and spoke with confident authority and wrenched them back.

"Not exactly helpless, anyhow," Tom Beck said to himself.

He was the only one of the group who did not walk across toward the cottonwoods which sheltered the long, red ranch house beside the creek. He sat there, braiding his belt, an indefinable half smile on his face.

The girl—for girlishness was her outstanding quality

—jumped out unassisted. She looked about slowly, at the house first of all, then at the low stable and the corrals and, lastly, down the creek, on either side of which the hills rose sharply, giving a false appearance of narrowness to the bottoms, and her eyes rested for a long moment on the ridges far below, blue and sharp in the crystal distance.

She was unaware that the driver was waiting for her to give further directions and that the three others had come close and stopped, waiting for her to notice them, for she said aloud, as though to herself:

“For a beginning, this is quite remarkable!” Then she laughed sharply, with a hard mirthless quality, and turned about. She was genuinely surprised to confront the men; evidence of this was in her eyes, which were large and remarkably blue. She smiled brightly and said:

“Oh, I didn’t know I was overlooking any one! I suppose you men belong here, on the ranch, and it’s likely you’ve been waiting for the new owner to come. Well, here I am! I’m Jane Hunter and I want to know who you are. Now what is your name?”

Her frankness, that unhesitating, assured manner of a distinct type of city-bred woman, was new but it over-rode somewhat the embarrassment they all felt.

“My name is Hepburn, ma’am,” Dad said and shook hands heavily. “I hope you like this place.”

“I know I shall, Mr. Hepburn. And your name?”

“That’s Jimmy Oliver, Miss Hunter,” Hepburn said.

Two-Bits had watched this with growing confusion and when she turned on him her searching, straightforward glance his freckles became lost in a pink suffusion. He swayed his body from the hips and looked high over her head as he offered a limp hand.

“I’m Mister Beal,” he said weakly.

“Don’t you believe that!” laughed Hepburn. “That’s Two-Bits. He ain’t entitled to any frills.”

“Two-Bits it is!” the girl cried, scanning his face in amazement at its color and contour. “I couldn’t call you

mister, Two-Bits. We're going to be too good friends for that!"

"Oh my gosh!" giggled the flustered cowboy and turned away, seeking refuge in the bunkhouse.

"You talk about me bein' got up by a feller that draws pictures, Tom," he said to Beck. "Holy Tin Can, you ought to see her! Why, this feller that paints them girls for these here, now, magazines painted her! She looks like she walked right out of a picture, with blue eyes an' yeller hair an' all pink an' white. An' friendly. . . . Oh my, I'll bet she makes this outfit take notice!"

Old Carlotta, the half-breed Mexican woman who had been housekeeper at the H C for years had come from the house to greet her new mistress. The trunks were carried in, the buckboard departed for its twenty-five mile trip back to town and the riders who had been at work further down the creek straggled in to hear the first tales of their new boss.

Conjecture was high as to her plan of procedure.

"It won't take long for things to happen. You can bank on that," Jimmy Oliver declared. "She ain't our kind of a woman an' the good Lord alone knows what notions she'll have, but she'll get busy! She's that kind."

He was not wrong for just as the sun was drawing down into the hills Carlotta appeared at the bunkhouse.

"Miss Hunter, she want to spik to Señor Dad an' Beck an' Jimmy an' Curtis," she said. "Right away, quick-pronto."

"This must be a mass meetin' with th' rest of us left out," Two-Bits said. "I'd give a dollar to look at her again . . . clost up. I'll bet I wouldn't be *afraid* to look next time."

The four men summoned went immediately to the big house. Beck lagged a trifle and it was certain from his manner that his curiosity was not greatly excited. He appeared to be amused, for his black eyes twinkled gaily, but as they passed through the gate they set their gaze on the

back of Hepburn's broad neck and a curious speculation showed in them.

Jane Hunter was waiting on the veranda which ran the length of the ranch house and without formalities began her explanation.

"You all know the situation, I believe. My uncle left me this ranch and I have come from New York to take possession. How long I remain depends on a number of things, but I find that for the present at least, I must conduct my own business. For the last four weeks, since the property came to me, it has been in the hands of Mr. Alward, the attorney in town. I arrived yesterday expecting to have his help, but his doctor has sent him into a lower altitude because of some heart difficulty and I'm alone on the job with nothing to guide me but a lengthy letter he wrote.

"I know little about business of any sort, I know nothing at all about ranching, so I have a great deal to learn. I do know that the first thing I need is an actual head for this place and that is why I called you here: to select a . . . a foreman, you call him?"

"Mr. Alward left word that any one of you four men would be competent and I'm going to choose one of you by chance: Understand, this is no guarantee to keep whoever is chosen on the job for any length of time, but I don't care to take the responsibility of handling the men myself, as my uncle and as Mr. Alward have done. Some one must do this and until I learn enough to know what I want I will be dependent upon whomever is selected."

She had spoken rapidly, at no loss for words, without a trace of hesitation or embarrassment, looking intently from face to face, studying the men as she explained her plan, but as she paused her eyes were on Beck's eyes and their gaze was arrested there a moment as though it had encountered something not usual.

"I am going to need all your help and all the suggestions that you can give me,"—with a slight gesture to include

the four, though she still looked straight at the tall Westerner,—“but I feel that at first there must be system of some sort, a man at the head of the organization. I’m going to let you draw straws for the place.”

The men stirred and looked at one another.

“That’s fair enough,” said Dad, with just a trace of indecision in his voice.

“For us,” commented Curtis, a lean, leathery man.

Jane stooped and picked up an oat straw. She broke off four pieces and placed them tightly between her thumb and palm.

“Now, draw!” she directed, with a smile, holding them toward Curtis. “The lucky straw will be the shortest.”

Curtis silently selected one of the bits. Then Jimmy Oliver drew and the two stood eyeing the lots they had picked. Hepburn had cleared his throat twice rather sharply when the drawing commenced and as he stepped forward at her gesture he manifested an eagerness which did not quite harmonize with his usual deliberation. He drew, eyed his straw and glanced sharply at those held by the other two.

Beck had not moved forward with the others, but stood back, thumbs hooked in his belt, his eyes, which were mildly smiling, still on the girl’s face. She looked at him again and saw there something other than the interest that approached eagerness which had been evident in the others; she read another thing which caught her attention; the man was laughing at her, she felt, laughing at her and at the entire performance. It seemed to him to be an absurdity and as she searched his expression again and perceived that this was no bucolic whim but the attitude of a man whose assurance was as stable as her own the smile which had been on her face faded a degree.

“Now it is your turn . . . the last straw,” she said to him.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he replied in an even, matter-of-

fact voice, though that annoying smile was still in his eyes, "but I guess you can count me out."

She lowered the hand which held the straw.

"You don't care to draw?"

"That's what I meant, ma'am."

"And why not?"

She was piqued, without good reason, at this refusal.

"In the first place, ma'am, I've never taken a chance in my life, if I knew it. I've tried to arrange so I wouldn't have to. I'm a poor gambler."

A suggestion of a flush crept into the girl's cheeks, for, though his manner was all frankness, he gave the impression that this was not his reason, or, at least, not his best reason; he seemed, in a subtle manner, to be poking fun at her. "Besides," he went on, "pickin' at pieces of straw don't seem like a good way to pick men."

"You understand why it is being done that way?" Though her manner did not betray it, she felt as though she were on the defensive.

"Yes, ma'am. I wasn't reflecting on you especially. I was thinkin' about your lawyer. But you won't be so very mad, if I ain't crazy to take a chance, will you? If anybody wants to know whether I can hold a job or not, I'd sooner have 'em ask about me or try me; when it comes to drawing lots I'll have to be counted out."

His eyes had been squarely on hers throughout and when he ceased speaking they still clung. Beyond a doubt, she reasoned, that flicker in them was amusement and yet she felt no resentment towards him; was not even annoyed as she had been at his first refusal. It was interesting; it impressed her with a difference between him and the three who had drawn. For a moment she was impelled to argue; she wanted that man to help her more than she wanted to retain her poise . . . just an instant.

Abruptly she turned to the others.

"Very well, we will see who did win."

The four drew close together and measured.

"Mr. Hepburn's is the shortest!" she cried; then looked at the fourth straw she still held. It was shorter by half an inch.

"You would have drawn well," she said to Beck, holding it up.

"So it seems, ma'am," he answered, but she noticed that he did not look at her. His eyes were on the new foreman's face, which was flushed with the depressions beneath the eyes puffed a bit. He was nervously breaking to shreds the straw which had won the place but about him was a bearing of unmistakable elation and something in his eyes, which were small, and about his chin suggested greed. . . .

The four started away and Jane stood watching them. Four! And one of them was to be her deputy in life's first—and perhaps life's saving—adventure. But she did not watch him, in fact, had no thought for him. Her eyes followed Tom Beck until he was out of sight and as she turned to enter the house she said:

"But he looks as though he might take a . . . long chance. . . ."

CHAPTER II

MY ADVICE, MA'AM

HE stood on a bearskin rug before the blazing fire, hat in hand, boots polished, tall and trim with his handsome head bowed just a trifle. The blazing logs gave the only light to the place and his bronzed face was burnished by their reflection.

"You sent for me?" he asked as she came into the room.

She advanced from the shadows and for a moment did not reply. She felt that he was taking her in from her crown of light hair, down through the smart, high-collared waist to the short, scant skirt which showed her silken clad ankles and the modish shoes. His eyes rested on those shoes. He was thinking that they were wonderfully plain for a city girl to wear, at least the sort of city girl he had ever known. But they had a simplicity which he thought went well with her manner.

"I had planned on talking to Mr. Hepburn this evening," she said. "I want to get all the information and all the advice I can from the start. Carlotta said he had gone away, so, in spite of the fact that you wouldn't gamble with me this afternoon, I sent for you. I think that you can tell me many things I need to know. You don't mind my asking you, do you? You don't feel that you'd be . . . be taking a chance, talking to me?"

She took his hat.

"Sit down," motioning to the davenport before the fire. "Would you like to start with a drink?"

"Why, yes," eyeing her calculatingly.

"There's not much here. I slipped one bottle of Ver-

mouth in a trunk. I'll have to try to mix a cocktail in a tumbler and there isn't any ice. It's likely to be a bad cocktail, but maybe it will help us talk."

She walked down the long room toward the dining table and sideboard at the far end and he heard glass clinking and liquids gurgling as he sat looking about with that small part of a smile on his features. All along the walls were books and above the cases hung trophies of the country: heads of deer and elk, a pelt of a mountain lion and of a bobcat, a pair of magnificent sheep's horns and a stuffed eagle. In the low windows were boxes of geraniums, Carlotta's pride.

"Here you are," she said as she returned, holding one of the two glasses toward Beck, who rose to accept it. "My uncle left a very small stock of drinks, but as soon as I know what I'm about I'll try to remedy that defect in an otherwise splendid establishment." Her manner was terse, brisk, open and her eyes met another's directly when she talked.

She lifted her glass to her chin's level and smiled at him.

"To the future!" she said.

His question was adroitly timed for she had just given the glass a slight toss and was already carrying its rim toward her lips when his words checked the movement.

"I take it, ma'am, that you'll want this liquor to go where it'll do your future the most good?"

He looked from her down to the cocktail he held and moved the glass in a quick little circle to set the yellow liquid swirling. His voice had been quite casual, but when he raised his eyes to meet her inquiring look the last of a twinkle was giving way to gravity.

"You mean? . . ."

"Just about what I said: that you'd like to have this brace of drinks do your future some good?"

"Why, yes, that was my intention. Why?"

"You called me down here to get a little advice. Let's commence here."

He reached out for her glass in a manner which was at once gentle and dominating, presumptuous but unoffending, with a measure of certainty; still, by his face, she might have told that he was experimenting with her, not just sure of how she would react, not, perhaps, caring a great deal. His fingers closed on her glass and she yielded with half laughing, half protesting astonishment. He took both glasses in one hand, moved deliberately toward the hearth and tossed their contents into the flames. He then set the empty tumblers on the mantel and turned about with a questioning smile on his lips.

The sharp, slowly dwindling hiss of quenched flame which followed completely died out before she spoke. Color had leaped into her cheeks and ebbed as quickly; her lips had shut in a tight line and for a fraction of time it was as though she would angrily demand explanation.

But she said evenly enough: "I don't understand that."

"I'm glad you didn't show how mad it made you," he replied.

"But why. . . . What made you do it?"

"You said, you know, that you wanted that liquor to go where it'd help your future. I thought the fire was about the best place for it under the circumstances."

"But why di—"

"And I believed you when you said you had a lot to learn and that you called me down to start the job. You have a way of makin' people think you mean what you say. I'm mighty glad to give you advice; I thought this was a good way to begin."

Jane gave a queer laugh and sat down, looking blankly into the fire. She turned her face after a moment and found him studying her as he sat at the other end of the davenport.

"I understand your meaning," she said, "but you're as startling in your actions as you must be in your reasoning. You didn't object to the idea of a drink; I didn't think many of you people did out here."

"We don't, ma'am. Most of us drink our share. I do."

"But just now you threw yours away."

"You see, I was bound to throw *yours* away. It wouldn't have been polite, would it, for me to drink and not let you?" His smile mocked her. "Besides," dryly—"I ain't much on these fancy drinks. You warned me that it wouldn't be so very good anyhow."

She stared at him in perplexity.

"You have no scruples against drinking?"

"Moderate drinking; no."

"Then why did you take this liberty with me?"—suggesting indignation.

"You see, you're a woman. You guessed a minute ago that there wasn't much objection to hard liquor here. I told you you were right; most of us boys drink, but we can afford to and you can't." His manner was light, almost to the degree of banter, as if that which had aroused her was the simplest of matters.

"A man in this country don't build a reputation on many things. So long as he's honest, he gets along pretty well. But a woman: that's different. She has to make people know she's right in everything she does."

"An occasional drink will make her less right?"

"Not a bit less, ma'am, but it won't help other folks to *know* she's right. And that's all that counts. Everybody, man or woman, who comes into the west has to make or break by what he does here; nothin' that has been, good or bad, matters. They commence from the bottom again and by what they do people judge them.

"Reputation is the first thing you've got to make for yourself. Everybody is watchin' you: the boys here on the ranch, the neighbors down creek, the people in town. You've got to show that you're honest, that you've got courage; if you were a man it could stop there, but you're a woman an' that makes it . . .

"Well, men out here expect things from a woman that I guess men in cities don't think so much about and you might

as well know now as any time that men in this country don't like to see a woman do some of the things they do. We ain't as polite as some; we ain't as gentle, when it's necessary to act quick and for sure, but maybe we make up for some of our roughness in the idea we have of women. We think a good woman is about as fine a thing as God has made, ma'am, and we have our ideas of goodness.

"You see, you've got to handle men; you've got to have their respect and you won't have their respect if you don't understand how they think, and then act accordingly.

"Besides, you're on a job that's going to take all the brains and grit and strength you've got. Booze never helped anybody on a job like that. If you was a man and your job was just ridin' after cattle it'd be different. But neither one is the case. . . .

"My advice, ma'am!"

She watched his face a moment before saying:

"As long as I can remember, women about me have been drinking. Ever since I grew up I've been drinking. I've never taken too much; I've never needed it; I've done it because . . . because it was being done."

"Yeah. Well, it ain't done here. It's a new country and a new life for you and one of the first things you've got to learn is how to get on with people. Maybe back east some of the folks wouldn't respect you if you didn't drink. There are folks like that, who think it's smart to do certain things, and maybe there are a lot of 'em like you, who don't need it, don't even want it, but they do it because of their reputations.

"You see, it's the same rule workin' backwards out here."

The girl moved to face the fire again. She scowled a trifle and the glow on her cheeks was not wholly due to the reflection of the blazing logs.

"Did it ever occur to you that there might be people who gave little attention to what others think of them?" she asked rather coldly.

"Sure thing! There are lots like that."

"I can see where, if a stranger were to plan to stay in a place like this for long it might be expedient to . . . to cater to the community morals. I don't intend to be a permanent resident. That is, I won't if I can help it. I don't expect that I'd ever come up to your notion of a worthy woman,"—a bitterness creeping into the voice—"so perhaps it is fortunate that I look on this ranch only as means to an end."

"You mean, money, ma'am?" he asked, and when she did not reply at once he went on: "Folks generally come west for one of three reasons: money or health or because they like the country. I take it your health's all right . . . and that you ain't just struck with the country."

She made a slight grimace and sat forward, elbows on knees.

"Yes, money!" she said under her breath. "I came here to get it. I'm going to." She looked up at him quickly, eyebrows arched in a somewhat defiant query, and, after a pause, went on: "You don't seem to approve?"

"No, ma'am," candidly, that smile only half hidden in his eyes.

"And why not? What else is there out here for a woman like me?"

"That's a hard question. One thing she might find is herself, for instance."

She gave a startled laugh and asked:

"Herself?"

"The same, ma'am. I s'pose there are folks who live for money and what it'll bring 'em. Cities must be full of 'em, or there wouldn't be so many cities. Folks do work pretty hard to make money an' pile it up, but I've never seen any of 'em that got to be very successful in other ways. The more money they made the more they seemed to depend on makin' money to attract attention. They don't seem to think that it ain't what a man does that really counts so much as what he is. The same goes for a woman."

She sat back, brows drawn together.

"Are you trying to preach to me?" she asked sharply.

Beck laughed lightly, as though that obvious hurting of her pride delighted him.

"Not just, ma'am. Preachers hammer away at folks about sin and such. I hadn't thought about you as a sinner; I was just considerin' you and your job; and what you say brought you here.

"It's none of my business what you want to get out of life. You told me what you wanted and asked me if I didn't like it, and I don't. That's all.

"It seems to me that everybody who's alive ought to want to get the best out of himself and I don't think you can do it by just tryin' to herd dollars." He divined in her retort what she was withholding. "Sure, I'm only an ordinary cowpuncher, ma'am. I don't seem to care much about any kind of success but I'm afflicted like everybody else: I'm a human being, and every one of us likes to pick on the faults he finds in others that correspond to his own faults. . . .

"You see, you've got a big chance here. You've got a chance to be somebody. This is one of the biggest outfits in this state. All this country out here has been this outfit's range for years. You ain't got a neighbor in miles because you amount to so much. Away down Coyote Creek, 'most thirty miles, is Riley's ranch, an' close by him is Hewitt's. Off west an' south is Pat Webb's who, far as you're concerned, might better be a good deal further west," dryly.

"Your uncle an' Riley was the first in here. Why, ma'am, they had to fight Indians to protect their cattle! They made names for 'emselves. They made money, too, or at least your uncle did, but he wasn't respected just because he made money. Men liked him because he *did* things.

"Men will like you if you do things, ma'am. . . . Perhaps you'll like yourself better, too."

He looked into her eyes and their gazes were for the moment very serious. Jane Hunter was meeting with a new

sense of values; Tom Beck had sensed a faint recklessness, a despair, about her and, behind all his mockery and lightness, was a warm heart. Then she terminated the interval of silence by saying rather impatiently:

"That's all very interesting, but what you said about my needing my brains and my grit is of greater interest. Do you mean that it's just a big job naturally or that there are complications?"

"Both."

"How much of both?"

Beck shoved a hand into his pocket and gave his head a skeptical twist.

"That remains to be seen. It's a man's job to run this place under favorable conditions. Your uncle, Colonel Hunter, sort of got shiftless in the last years. He let things slide. I don't know about debts and such, but I suspect there are some. There are other things, though. You've got some envious neighbors . . . and some that ain't particular how they make their money,"—with just a shade of emphasis on the last.

"You mean that they steal?"

"Plenty, ma'am."

"But how? Who?"

"I don't know, but it seems to be gettin' quite the custom here to get rich off the H C . . . especially since the place changed owners."

"Why at that particular time?"

"Since it got noised about that a woman was goin' to own it there's been a lively interest in crime. I told you that your uncle was a man who was respected a lot. Some feared him, too."

"And they won't respect me because I'm a woman?"

"That's about it. It's believed, ma'am, that a woman, 'specially an Eastern woman, can't make a go of it out here, so what's the use of givin' her a fair show?"

He waited for her to speak again but she did not and he added with that experimental manner:

"So, maybe, if you want to make money, it'd be well to find a buyer. Maybe if you was to take an interest in this ranch and did want to be . . . to stay in this country, you couldn't make it go."

"Do you think that's impossible?"

He waited a moment before saying:

"I don't know. You don't make a very good start, ma'am."

"At least you are deliciously frank!"

"It pays; it does away with misunderstandings. I wouldn't want you to think — since you've asked me — that I believed you could make a go of this ranch, even if you wanted to."

That stung her sharply; she drew her breath in with a slight sound and leaned quickly forward as if ready to denounce his skepticism, but she did not speak.

She only arose impatiently and walked to the mantel.

"Do you smoke?" she asked, holding out a box of cigarettes.

"Yes; do you?"

"Yes."

In the word was a clear defiance. She struck a match and held it towards him; then lighted her own cigarette.

Seated again, she stared into the fire, smoking slowly, but as his eyes remained fast on her the color crept upward into her cheeks, higher and brighter until she turned to meet the gaze that was on her and with a bite to the words asked:

"You don't approve of this, either?"

"Why, ma'am, I like to smoke."

"But you stare at me as though I were committing a crime."

"You see, you're the first good white woman I've ever seen smoke."

"You —" She checked the question, looked at him and then eyed her cigarette critically.

"I don't suppose women out here do smoke, do they?"

"No, ma'am; not much."

"And you men? You men who drink and smoke don't want the women to enjoy the same privilege?"

"That appears about it."

She did not answer. He rose and looked down upon her. One tendril of her golden hair, like silk in texture, caressed her fine-grained cheek, delicately contrasted against its alluring color. He would have liked to press it closer to the skin with his fingers . . . quite gently. But he said:

"I guess you and I don't understand each other very well, and, if we don't, it ain't any use in our talking further. As for advisin' you about your business . . ."

Jane blew on her ash.

"I just tried to show you how to start right, accordin' to my notion, and if it made you mad I'm sorry.

"After all, it don't make so much difference what other folks think of us. It's what we think of ourselves that counts most, but none of us can get clear away from the other *hombre's* ideas."

That twinkle crept back in to his eyes. Her little frame fairly bristled independence and self-sufficiency; it was in the pert set of her head, the poise of her square shoulders, the languid swinging of one small foot.

"I think that you think a lot of yourself, ma'am. That's more 'n most folks can say."

She rose as he reached for his hat.

"I'm glad to have your opinion on the proportions of my job," she said briefly, "and for that I am glad that you came in."

The oblique rebuke could not be misunderstood.

"I'm complimented," he replied, and, although she looked frankly and impersonally up at him, she had a quick fear that despite her assurance this man was leaving her with a strange feeling of inferiority, and when he went through the doorway into the night she was quite certain he was smiling merrily.

She stood until the sound of his footsteps dwindled, then turned to the table and stood idly caressing the wood. Her

fingers encountered something which she picked up and examined, at first abstractedly. It was a bit of straw, the one Beck had refused and, which drawn, would have made him her right hand man. She moved towards the fire to toss it into the flames; checked herself and, instead, put it between the covers of a book which lay handy.

She stood on the stone hearth thinking of what he had said, cigarette smoke curling up her small hand and delicate wrist. The offended feeling subsided and, wonderingly, she tried to restimulate it; the sensation would not return! Of a sudden she felt small and weak and of little consequence.

So he doubted, even, that she could be herself!

She dropped the stub of her cigarette into the fire and, frowning, reached for another, and tapped its end on the mantel. She struck a match and put the white cylinder to her lips. Then, quite slowly, she waved the glare out and tossed the tiny stick into the coals. With a movement which was so deliberate that it was almost weary she dropped the unlighted cigarette after it. Slight as was the gesture there was in it something of finality.

The coals were dimmed with ash before she moved to walk slowly to the window and look out. It was cold and still.

A movement among the cottonwoods attracted her. A man was walking there, slowly, as one on patrol. She watched him go the length of the row of trees; then followed his slow progress back, saw him stand watching the house a moment before he moved on towards the bunk-house.

She lay awake for hours that night, partly from a helpless rage and, later, a rare thrill, a hope, perhaps, kept sleep from her mind.

CHAPTER III

THE NESTER — AND ANOTHER

“**N**OW about the men, Miss Hunter,” said Hepburn. When he reached this subject he looked through the deep window far down the creek and had Jane known him better she might have seen hesitancy with his deliberation, as though he approached the subject reluctantly.

“How many will you need?” she asked.

“Not many yet. Four besides myself. There’s seven here now. That is, there’ll be six, because one is pullin’ out this mornin’ of his own accord. We’ll need more when the round-up starts, but until then — about June — we can get along. The fewer the better.”

“That will be largely up to you. Of course, I will be consulted.”

“I guess we’ll keep Curtis and Oliver. Then there’s Two-Bits —”

“Oh, keep Two-Bits by all means!” she laughed. “I’m in love with him already!”

“All right, we’ll keep Two-Bits. As for the other, there’s a chance to choose because —”

“Beck; how about him?”

Her manner was a bit too casual and she folded a sheet of memoranda with minute care before her foreman, who eyed her sharply, replied:

“He’s settled that for himself, I guess. He was packin’ his war bag when I come down here. I told him to come to the house for his time.”

“You mean he’s leaving?”

Hepburn nodded.

“Why?”

“Well, I guess his nose is out of joint at not bein’ picked for foreman.”

"But he wouldn't even draw. Said he wouldn't take a chance!"

"I know. He appeared not to give a hang for the job, but he's a funny man. He an' I never got along any too well. We don't hitch."

"Is he a good worker?"

"If he wants to be. He don't say much, but he always . . . Why, he always seems to be laughin' at everybody and everything."

"I think *I* could persuade him to want to work for me."

"Perhaps. But then, too, he's hot tempered. In kind of bad with some of the boys over trouble he's had."

"What trouble?"

"Why, principally because he beat up a man — Sam McKee — on the beef ride last fall."

"What for?"

"Well . . . He thought this man was a little rough with his horse."

"And he whipped him because he had abused a horse? That, it seems to me, isn't much against him."

"No; maybe not. He beat him a sight worse than he beat his horse," he explained, moving uneasily. "Anyhow, he's settled that. Here he comes now, after his time."

Jane stepped nearer the window. Beck approached, whistling softly. He wore leather chaps with a leather fringe and great, silver conchos. A revolver swung at his hip. His movements were easy and graceful. She opened the door and, seeing her, he removed his hat.

"I've come for my time, ma'am," he explained.

"Won't you come in? Maybe you're not going to go just yet."

He entered and she thought that as he glanced at Hepburn, who did not look up, his eyes danced with a flicker of delight.

"I don't know as I can stay, ma'am. I told your foreman a little while ago that I'd be going. Somebody's got to go, and it may as well be one as another."

"Don't you think my wishes should be consulted?" she asked.

He twirled his hat, looking at her with a half smile.

"This is your outfit, ma'am. I should think your wishes ought to go, but it won't do for you to start in with more trouble than's necessary."

"But if I want you and Mr. Hepburn wants you, where is the chance for trouble? You *do* want him, don't you, Mr. Hepburn?"

The older man looked up with a forced grin.

"Bless you, Miss Hunter, yes! Why, Tom, the only reason I thought we might as well part was because I figured you'd be discontented here."

"Now! You see, your employer wants you and your foreman wants you. What more can you ask?" the girl exclaimed, facing Beck.

"Nothin' much, of course, unless what I think about it might matter."

Her enthusiasm ebbed and she looked at him, clearly troubled.

"I am not urging you to stay because I need one more man. It is essential to have men I can trust. I can trust you. I need you. I . . . I'm quite alone, you know, and I have decided to stay . . . if I *can* stay."

She flushed ever so slightly at the indefinable change in his eyes.

"You told me last night some of the things I must do, which I can't do wholly alone. I should like very much to have you stay,"—ending with a girlish simplicity quite unlike her usual manner.

"Maybe my advice and help ain't what you'd call good," he said.

"I thought it over when you had gone," she said, "and I came to the conclusion that it was good advice." Her eyes remained on his, splendidly frank.

"Some of us are apt to be disconcerted when we listen to new things; and, again, when we know that they come sin

cerely and our pride quits hurting we're inclined, perhaps, to take a new point of view. I have, on some things."

His face sobered in the rare way it had and he said:

"I'm mighty glad."

Hepburn had watched them closely, not understanding, and in his usually amiable face was a cunning speculation.

"I wouldn't ask you to take a chance against your better judgment. If you must move on, I'm sorry. But . . . I need you."

With those three words she had ended: I need you. But in them was a plea, frank, unabashed, and her eyes were filled with it and as he stood looking down at his hat, evidently undecided, she lifted one hand in appeal and spoke again in a tone that was low and sweet:

"Won't you, please?"

He nodded and said:

"I'll stay."

"I'm so glad!" she cried. "And you're glad, aren't you, Mr. Hepburn?"

The foreman had watched closely, trying to determine just what this all meant, but not knowing what had gone before, he was mystified. At her question he forced a show of heavy enthusiasm and said:

"Bet your life!" Then looking up to see the tall cowboy eyeing him with that half humorous smile, he rose and said:

"Now we can start doing business. Tom, Miss Hunter wants a horse, says she can ride and wants the best we've got, right off, to-day. There's that bunch that's been ranging in Little Piñon all winter. Guess we'd better bring 'em down this forenoon and let her pick one."

They departed. They had little to say to one another in the hours it required to gather the horses and bring them down, but when they were within sight of the corrals Hepburn began to speak as though what he had to say was the result of careful deliberation.

"I don't want us to have any misunderstandin', Tom.

This mornin' I figured you wanted to move and I don't want any man in the outfit who'd rather be somewhere else, so long as I'm runnin' it." He shifted his weight in the saddle and glanced at Beck, who rode looking straight ahead. "'Course, you and I ain't been pals. I've thought sometimes you didn't just like me —"

"I s'pose she'll want a gentle horse," the other broke in. "Prob'ly. . . ."

"You and I can be friends, I know. We can get along —"

"Look at this outfit!" Beck interrupted again, this time with better reason.

Around the bend in the road appeared a queer cavalcade. It was headed by a pair of ancient mules drawing a covered wagon, on the seat of which sat a scrawny, discouraged man with drooping lids, mustache and shoulders. To the wagon were tied three old mares and behind them trailed a half dozen colts, ranging from one only a few weeks old to a runty three-year-old.

These were followed by a score of cattle, mostly cows and yearling calves, and the rear was brought up by a girl, riding a big brown horse.

She was young, and yet her face was strangely mature. She wore a hat, the worse for wear, a red shirt, open at the throat, a riding skirt and dusty boots. She was slouched easily in the saddle, as one who has ridden much.

Tom spurred ahead to prevent their horses from entering a draw which opened on the road just where they must pass and as he slowed to a walk and looked back he saw Hepburn making a movement of one hand. That hand was just dropping to the fork of his saddle but — and he knew that this may have been purely a product of his imagination — he thought that it had been lifted in a gesture of warning.

The foreman halted and the wagon stopped with a creak, as of relief.

"Just foller on down and swing to the left. Keep right

on. You'll pass the state boundry," Beck heard Hepburn say.

The wagon started again and Dad joined him.

"Goin' some place?" Tom asked.

"Utah. He was askin' the way."

Just then the girl came within easy talking distance.

"Goin' far?" Tom asked.

"Not so very fur," the other replied sullenly and swung a worn quirt against her boot.

They rode on after their horses.

"Nesters," Beck commented grimly. "They're a bad lot to see comin' in."

"Thank God, they're headed for Utah," Dad replied.

"Yeah. Utah's a long ways, though. The girl didn't seem to think they was going so very far."

The other made no answer and after a moment Beck said:

"Notice the brand on them cattle? T H O? That ain't a good neighbor for the H C to have. . . . Unless it's an honest neighbor."

"Well, they're goin' into Utah," Dad said doggedly.

"You know, Hepburn, one of the first things I'd do if I was foreman of this outfit?" Beck asked.

"What's that?"

"Take up the water in Devil's Hole. That's the best early feed this outfit has got, but without water it's worthless. Nesters are comin' in, which would worry me, if I was foreman. The Colonel had somebody file on it once, planning to buy when he'd patented the claim. This party didn't make good, and the matter dropped."

The other did not reply for a moment, but looked hard at his horse's ears, as if struggling to control himself.

"I've already took that up with her," he said sulkily, and stirred in his saddle.

"If I wasn't foreman of an outfit, do you know what I'd do? I'd let the foreman do the worryin'."

Beck scratched his chin with a concern which surely could not have been genuine, for he said:

"Yeah. That's the best way. Only . . ."

"Well, you had your chance to be foreman; why didn't you take it?"

Beck pondered a moment.

"In the first place I wasn't crazy wild to stay with this outfit, 'cause when I lift my nose in the air and sniff real careful, I can smell a lot of hell coming this way, and I'm a mighty meek and peaceful citizen.

"In the second place, I don't care much about drawing the best job in the country like I'd draw a prize cake at a church social."

Hepburn sniffed.

"You passed it up, though. Now, why don't you pass up worryin' about my job?"

Beck did not reply at once, but turned on the other a taunting, maddening smile.

"You're right. I passed it up, but there's something that won't let me pass up the worry.

"You know what that is,"—nodding toward the distant ranch house. "You know she's in a jack pot. You heard her tell me she needed good men, men she could trust, and the good Lord knows that's so. You know I stayed on because she asked me like she meant it and not because I fancied the job.

"I've got a notion that makin' good out here means more to her than making money; I like her style, and I like to help her sort if I can. That's why I may do more 'n an ordinary hand's share of worryin'.

"You know, somebody's got to,"—significantly.

"What's meant by that, Beck?" Dad asked after a moment and the grit in his tone told that the insinuation had not missed its mark.

"If it was so awful hard for you to guess, Hepburn, I don't think you'd get on the peck so easy. I mean that since she's asked me to stay and work for her, I'm on the job. Not only with both hands and feet and what head I've got, but with my eyes and my ears and my heart.

"I don't want trouble, but if I've got to take trouble on, I'll do it on the run; you can tie to that! I don't like you, Hepburn; I don't trust you. Your way ain't my way — No, no, you listen to *me!*" as the other attempted to interrupt. "A while back you was trying to talk friendship to me when I'm about as popular with you as fever. I don't do things in that style. I ain't got a thing on you, but if this was my ranch I wouldn't want you for my foreman."

"You mean you think I'd double cross her an —"

"I don't recall bein' that specific. I just mentioned that I don't trust you. There's no use in your getting so wrought up over it. I may be wrong. If I am you'll win. I may be takin' a chance, which is against my religion, but I'm here to work for this Hunter girl and her only and it won't be healthy for anybody who is working against her to bring himself to my notice.

"I guess we understand each other. Maybe you can get me fired. If so, that's satisfactory to me. So long as I'm here and working for you, I'll be the best hand you've got. If you're lookin' for good hands I'll satisfy you. If you ain't . . . we may not get along so well."

There was a seriousness in his eyes, but behind it was again the flicker of mockery as though this might not be such a serious matter after all.

"We'll see, Beck," Hepburn said with a slow nodding. "We understand each other. You've covered a lot of territory. Your cards are on the table. Bet!"

Tom stroked his horse's withers thoughtfully. He continued to smile, but the smile was not pleasant.

When they entered the big gate an automobile was standing before the bunkhouse and after turning the horses into a corral they dismounted and walked towards it.

"Hello, Larry!" exclaimed Hepburn. "What brings you out?"

"Nothin' much, judgin' by his conversation," replied the man who had driven the car.

"Visitor?"

"Dude. Regular dude from N'Yawk, b' Gosh!" He spat and grinned. "Come in yesterday and was busier 'n hell all day buzzin' around town. First thing this a. m. he wants to come here. Great attraction you've got, it seems."

"The new boss?"

"Th' same, indeed! I seen her. Quite a peach, I'll go on record. But . . . Th' boys tell me she's going to run this outfit with her own lily white hands."

"So she says," replied Dad benevolently. "I think she'll do a good job, too."

"Like so much hell, you do! An' I hear you're foreman, Dad. You figurin' on marryin' the outfit or gettin' rich by honest endeavor?"

"Sho, Larry! You and your jokes!" the man grumbled good naturedly and entered the building.

"Well, if any of you waddies are calculatin' marryin' this filly you've got to build to her. This dude sure means business. He's found out more about the H C in one day than I ever knew. Besides, what I knew an' he didn't he got comin' out. Sure 's a devil for obtainin' news."

"There he is now; see?"

He gestured toward the ranch house where Jane and the stranger stood on the veranda, the girl pointing to the great sweep of country which showed down creek. Then they turned and reentered the house.

"And so this is yours!" the man laughed. "Yours and your business!"

"My business, Dick! For the first time I feel as though I had a real object in living."

He smiled cynically.

"Jane, Queen of the Range!" he mocked.

She did not smile with him, but said soberly:

"I expect it is funny to you. It must be funny to all the old crowd. I can hear them, as soon as they know that I have decided to stay here, the girls at tea, the men in their clubs, talking it over. Jane Hunter, burying herself in the mountains and *doing* something, becoming earnest and seri-

ous minded, getting up with the sun and going to bed at dark! It is strange!"

"It's too strange for life, Jane," he said, pulling up his trousers gingerly and sitting on the davenport. He leaned back and smoothed his sleek hair. "It isn't real. You're going to wake up before long and find that out.

"It was absurd enough for you to come here, but this preposterous notion that you are going to *stay*. . . . Why, that's beyond words! What got into you, anyhow?"

He eyed her closely.

"I don't know, yet. It's a strange impulse but it's real, the first real thing that's ever gotten into me, I guess. I know only that . . . except that it is a pleasant sensation.

"When I left New York I was desperate. I came here to take something tangible that was mine and go back with it and now I've found out that the thing I want is nothing that I can see or touch, that I can't take it away with me. Not for a long time, anyhow. It isn't waiting ready-made for me; I must create it from the materials that are in my hands."

He continued to look at her a thoughtful moment.

"You've told me a lot about yourself and about this ranch and about these men who are working for you. You've told me about this country and, rather vaguely, about your plans. I suspect you don't know much about them yet," he added parenthetically. "You've not asked a question about New York, nor why I came."

She picked a yellowed leaf from a geranium plant and turned to face him.

"As for New York," she said with a lift of the eyebrows and a quick tilt of her head, "I don't give a . . . damn,"—softly. "As for your coming, I didn't need ask. When a man has followed a girl wherever she has gone, to sea, to other countries, for four years, there is nothing surprising in the fact that he should trail her only two-thirds of the way across this continent. . . .

"But it's no use, Dick. I made up my mind that I would

not marry you before I came here. I tried to convince you of the honesty of my purpose in my last letter, but perhaps I failed because I wasn't truly honest with myself then. I thought I was through, but, in reality, I was only planning a variation of the old way of doing things.

"Now I'm finished, absolutely, with the rot I've called life!"

She lifted her chin and shook her head in emphasis. The man laughed.

"You amuse as much as you thrill me," he said, looking at her hungrily.

"That's a splendid way to help a fellow: to laugh at the first effort I make to justify my existence."

"I want to help you, Jane. I've always wanted to help you. I've put myself and what I have at your disposal. I've not only done that, but I've begged and pleaded and schemed to make you take them. You'd never listen when I talked love to you.

"You've always seemed to be a peculiarly material-minded girl and I had to play on that. But when I've talked ease and comfort and luxury to you, you know that I've meant more than just those things. It's been love, Jane . . . love in every syllable."

He rose and walked to stand before her.

"That hurt," she said, with a sharp little laugh. "That . . . materialism. But I believe it was only too true. It had to be, you see. It was the only thing I could see to live for. There was the one thing I missed, the thing I had expected to find. It was the thing you talked about: Love. I wanted love, tried to find love and at twenty-five gave it up. That's a horrible thing, Dick. Giving that up at twenty-five!"

"But I have offered you love, continually, for four years."

"Dick . . . oh, Dick! You don't know what that means. You showed that when you selected your tactics: trying to give me things that I could taste and touch and see.

"If it had been love, the real thing, that you felt, you'd

have overwhelmed me with it, you would not have allowed another consideration to enter, you'd have swept me off my feet with making me understand that it *was* love. You wouldn't have talked places and motors, luxury and aimlessness."

Her voice shook. She was hurt, bordering on anger.

"You pass the buck," he retorted evenly. "You've told me, time after time, that love didn't matter to you."

"Not the sort you offered. It never could."

"There's another kind, then?"

"Somewhere,"—with an emphatic nod.

"You think you can find the sort you're looking for here?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought of that yet, but I know there is something else I can find."

"And that?"

"Myself!"—stoutly.

He threw back his head with a hearty laugh.

"You talk like a convert, Jane!"

"I am, Dick. Just that. I've seen the evil of my ways, I have seen the light; I'm going to try to justify my existence, going to try to stand for something, to be something, not just a girl with looks or with . . . money.

"I may miss love entirely, but I have realized, all of a sudden, that as yet I'm not fit for the love I wanted. Why, I have nothing to give to a man; I would take all and give nothing. A woman doesn't win a true love by such a transaction. If I can stand alone, if I can fight my own battles, if I can overcome obstacles that are as real as the love I have wanted, then I will be justified in seeking that love. . . .

"And there's another consideration: If this thing I have wanted never does come I have the opportunity of gaining all that you say you could give me by my own efforts: the comforts, the material things. I wouldn't be trading myself for them, you see; I'll be winning them with my hands and what intelligence I may possess."

"Are you sure of that, Jane? Are you sure that a girl

who has never done a tap of work in her life, who has not even talked business with business men can come out here and beat this game? Oh, I know what I'm talking about and you don't. I spent all yesterday in town looking up this place because your letter was convincing in at least one thing. I know your enthusiasm, when it's aroused. I know that you'd rush in where a business prince wouldn't even chance a peek!

"When men talk about you in town they grin. The bartender grinned when he told me about you. The banker grinned. The man who drove me out thought it was a fine joke! These men know; they're not skeptical because they know you or your past, but they know the job and that you're a stranger. That's enough. You can't beat another man's game."

"I can try, can't I?"

"But what's the use?"—with a gesture of impatience and a set of the mouth that was far from pleasant. "You're doomed to fail and even if you should hit on the one chance in a thousand of pulling through, what would you get? Less than I can give you in the time it takes to sign my name. You won't let me talk love and you don't seem to have much hope that you ever will find the love you think you want, so let's put love aside once more. Come with me, Jane. I'll give you all you could ever hope to get here and without the cost of the awful effort anything like success would require."

"You've been bored, perhaps, and discouraged. You've taken this thing as a . . . a last straw. Won't you listen to reason?"

"The last straw," she repeated. "Yes, I guess that is it. Dick, do you know how close I came to letting you do the thing you want to do?" She put the question sharply. "I'll tell you: Within three hundred dollars! That's how close."

"Oh, you don't know the game I've played. No one

knows it. You all have just seen the exterior, the show. You've never been behind the scenes with me.

"I never knew my mother. I never knew my father well. I don't know that he cared much for me after she went; perhaps, though, he was only afraid to bring up a girl alone. First, it was boarding school, then finishing school, then a woman companion of the smart sort. Then he died, and we discovered that his fortune was not what it had been, that it was a miserable thing for a girl to depend on who had been trained as I had been trained.

"You met me soon after I was alone. I fell in with your crowd and they picked me up. I didn't like them particularly and certainly I didn't like their life, but it was the only one open for me. We lived hard, heartless lives, made up of week-ends and dances and cocktails and greed!

"Materialism is the right charge! I was steeped in it; all those girls were. It was the only thing any of us lived for. Girls sold themselves for material advantage; they loathed it, most of them, but they lied to themselves and tried to make the rest of us believe it was happiness. They knew, and we knew what it was and we knew, too, that they were helpless to do otherwise.

"Then you came and made love to me on the same crass basis. I liked you, Dick. I didn't love you. I cared no more for you than I did for three or four men so I kept putting you off, never actually discouraging you to a point where you would give up. I was simply closing my eyes to the inevitable.

"Now and then we met women, to us strange creatures, who did things. I never can make anyone understand how inferior I felt beside them. Why, I remember one little decorator who, because she was young and cheap, came to do my apartment over. I had her stay for dinner and she was quite overwhelmed with many things.

"When she went away I cried from sheer envy . . . and she was going down somewhere into Greenwich Village to

sleep in a stuffy little studio. But she was *doing* something. I used to feel guilty before my dressmaker and even my maid. I didn't understand why that was, then; it was not a sensation produced by reason; by intuition, rather.

"And then I had to look at things as they were. I paid up everything and totaled my bank balance. Every source of income I had ever had was gone and I had left . . . three hundred and two dollars. That was on a Friday, the Friday of our last week-end party at the Hollisters' in Westchester.

"You talked to me again that night after we had been playing billiards. Dick, I had made up my mind to take you up. The words were on my lips; I was within a breath of telling you that it was a bargain, that I'd sell myself to you for the things you could buy me. . . .

"I don't know why I didn't. Maybe it was this part of me I had never known until I came here, this part which enthuses so over what lies before me now, the part that used to envy the girls who did things. We went back to town and there was a letter for me from this little frontier law office, telling me I had inherited this ranch. I didn't sleep a minute. I was sole owner of a big business. . . .

"I never can make you understand the relief I experienced! It meant money and money meant that I could go on in the old way, putting off the inevitable, blinding myself to what I actually was.

"That was my motive in coming here: to turn this property into money. And no sooner had I made the acquaintance of these people than I began to learn that my point of view had been radically different from theirs. I had thought that money would give me the thing I wanted, independence and prestige; but I found that with them, with the best of them, anyhow, that sort of standing was not considered.

"The thing that counts out here is being yourself, Dick, in making a place by your determination, your wits, by impressing people with the best that is in you. Material things don't count in the mountains; that is, they don't count pri-

marily. They are nice things to possess but the possession of them alone does not bring respect . . . the respect of others or self respect. That, I think, is what I want: respect. That is what I am going to win. The only way I can win it is to establish a place for myself by my own efforts. These men doubt that I can do it. You are right, I believe, when you picture the whole country expecting me to fail. Well, that's an incentive, isn't it, to do my best? That is what I am here to do!

"There, there's Book One." Then looking out into the country. . . . "There's the rest of the story."

The man did not reply for an instant but stood frowning at the floor.

"And when you fail? What then?"

She laughed almost merrily.

"Don't say *when* so positively! But if I should fail, Dick, I might have to take you up! It might break my faith in myself because it's a young, immature faith, but it will give me a chance, a few months of seeing whether I'm of any account. It gives me a hope."

As she spoke of her alternative a glimmer as of hope passed across the man's thin, finely moulded face but he did not let her see. He shook his head and said:

"After this the first thing I need is a drink."

"On the sideboard," she answered, "is my stock."

He walked down the room and examined the bottles, then poured out two drinks and returned with them.

"Anyhow, we'll drink to your future, whatever and wherever it may be," he said, cynical again.

"That's kind of you, but I'm afraid you'll have to drink alone."

She put the glass he had handed her on the table.

"It's the first time I've ever seen you refuse a drink."

"A record broken! That, like the rest of the old life, all belongs in Book One."

"You . . . you never thought you used enough to hurt?"

"No. I'm sure I never used enough to hurt my body. I never thought I used enough to hurt anything about me . . . until last night."

"What made you change your mind?"

She was half impelled to pass the question off, then said resolutely:

"A man came here to talk to me, one of my cowpunchers. I made a cocktail. He threw it away."

"Well, that was a devil of a thing to do. Did you fire him, as he deserved?"

"No,"—deliberately, tracing a line on a rug with her toe and watching it critically—"I took his advice. You see, the men out here expect things from women that no one has ever expected from me before."

He sneered: "Turned Puritan, Jane? A sweet thing to face, trying to be other than yourself, confining yourself to the morals of the crowd."

"Not just that, Dick. There's a sweetness about it, yes. As for morals: we didn't discuss them at all. . . .

"This man said that he supposed some people thought it was smart to drink. That hit me rather on the head. . . We were the smartest people in New York, weren't we?"

"Rot!"

"Perhaps. It interested me, though, when I'd gotten over the first shock. He said another thing that interested me; he said that I was the first *good* white woman he'd ever seen smoke."

He laughed harshly.

"At least he did you the honor to think you good."

"Yes,"—still deliberately,—“and it was a novel sensation. It was the first time any man had ever appealed to the commonplace thing in me that we call womanhood. He wasn't preaching. It was a practical matter with him. . . .

"I don't think you'd understand this man, Dick. He takes little things quite seriously and yet he appears to be laughing at the whole scheme all the time."

He put his glass down slowly.

"Do you mean that one of these roughnecks has been making love to you?"

"Oh, by no means. I don't think he even likes me and I want him to! Why, this morning he was going away, was not even going to work for me, and I had to beg him to stay.

"Dick, you don't understand! This man is so different from you, from me, from all of us. Rough, yes, but I don't think he'd try to buy a woman. And if he should I'm sure he'd be most frank about it; he wouldn't hide behind words."

She looked hard at him and though she smiled her words stung him, but before he could break in she went on:

"When I sat here having him talk to me last night I had that dreadful inferior feeling again, felt as though I weren't up to the standard of good women that these roughnecks hold. I can't explain it to you because you wouldn't let yourself understand. I was furious for a time, but he was right, according to his way of thinking.

"That way is going to be my way,"—with growing firmness. "I'm playing a new game and I must play it according to the rules. I did more than make up my mind to leave the drinks and cigarettes alone. I resolved that I'd try to be worthy in every way of the respect I want these men to have for me!"

"Because this Westerner doesn't approve of the way you have lived?"

"Yes. He knows the rules of the new game."

"Jane, I'm going to stop this foolishness!" He advanced to her and caught her hands in his. "I love you, I love you! I'm not going to see you losing your head this way!"

She struggled to withdraw her hands.

"No, I'm going to hold you, going to keep you. I'm —" He drew her to him roughly, but she slipped from the clasp of his arm and backed across the room, her hands still imprisoned in his.

"Dick!"

It was not her cry which caused him to halt. It was a step outside the door and, standing there, her hands in his, he met the level, amused gaze of Tom Beck.

Jane turned from him and he let her go without attempt to restrain her further.

"Ma'am, the horses are here. Your foreman said to tell you."

His face lost a measure of its lightness as he stood hat in hand, looking from the man whose face was lined with passion to the girl, flushed and a bit breathless.

"Very well. . . . And thank you. I'll be out soon."

He stood a moment irresolute, as though he thought his presence might be needed there. Then turned and walked away.

"Your help seems rather unceremonious," Hilton remarked.

"Thanks for that! What if he had seen more? Dick, are you beside yourself? You call this love?"

"It proves that it's love," he replied tensely. "You set me wild with your vagaries, Jane! You—" He checked himself and, with an obvious effort, smiled. Then went on with voice and manner under control: "You see, I am much in love with you and losing you for only a little while puts me a bit off my head."

"I have wanted you for four years and I'm jealous of the months, even the weeks. I'm sure, but that doesn't help much."

"Sure? Of what?"

"Of you."

"And why?"

"Because I know you. You confessed your weaknesses just a moment ago. You know as well as I that you're without foundation, without background in this experience. Why, Jane, if you'd been capable of fighting your own battles, you'd have forced the issue long before it was necessary, but you are not. You need help, you need the faith of other people."

"Why, women like you weren't made to stand alone!"

"Flattering!"

"Yes, it is. You were made to be loved, to be protected, to have the men take the knocks for you, you and all your kind. You were born to lean and to make the lives of men worth while by leaning on them, never to attempt to go your own way. You have always done just this and you have admitted it, here, this afternoon.

"Your wild wants, your absurd desires. . . . Everyone has them. That is a rule of life: wanting to do the thing you are not fitted to do. You can no more be a business woman than I can fly; you can no more cut yourself away from your old environment and slip into this than one of your cowpunchers could fit into my life.

"Don't you see that you're risking disaster? In your old life you had a belief in yourself; in this you think you have, but you have not, your eyes will be opened and when you see that you have failed . . . then you will be a failure, and nothing is so hopeless as that realization.

"You are weak, and I thank God for that weakness. You know that it is either this, or me. You are trying this, trying to refuse me, but you will come back to me just as surely as we stand together in this room. You may come back without a shred of faith in yourself, but I have faith in you, in the old Jane, the one I know and love, and I can bring that back. The future won't be bad; it will be wholly good."

His words were very gentle, his manner most kindly, but beneath it was a scarcely detectable hardness, a deliberate, cold determination, and perhaps it was this which struck a fear into the girl's heart.

Weak? Surely, she was weak! Always had been weak, never had proved strength by act or decision until now. And she did not know . . . she did not know. . . .

"You are sure that I will come back?" she managed to say naturally enough. "What if I should fail? Might I not try somewhere else?"

"You might, if you were another sort. But you won't. And you will fail, in spite of all you can do, Jane."

She sensed clearly the harsh strength beneath his smooth manner; his pronouncement had not been as an opinion; as a verdict, rather, and ominous in its assurance.

He picked up his hat and gloves.

"I know; I know. It is of no use to argue with you. You must learn this lesson by experience. It is going to be bitter, but I will do all I can to make what waits beyond take away that taste, Jane.

"I am not going away. I'm going to stay in this little town. After four years of waiting and following I can well do that. Your world is there, Jane, yours for the asking. There are the things you wanted; there is the love you want if you only will see it."

He left her then and when he had gone she felt a quick panic come. It all seemed so absurd, her struggling in the things which held her back; and his manner left her with a sense that he thought more than he had spoken, that his assurance was founded well, that he would not be the tacit waiter he had suggested. She knew his passion for her, she knew his will and it came to her then that beneath his sleekness he was ruthless.

She stared down Coyote creek, not following him with her eyes.

"The things I have wanted. . . . Yes," she thought. "But *love*: is that anywhere?"

The sound of the car departing roused her and she watched it go. Then a commotion in the corral attracted her. She saw horses milling, saw Tom Beck standing ready, rope in his hand; then, with a dexterous flip of the loop, a slight, overhand motion, he snared a pinto and braced his feet against the antics of the animal and held firmly until it had quieted.

She watched him go down the rope slowly, hand over hand, with caution and assurance until he rested his fingers on the nose of the frightened animal. A forefoot shot out

in a lightning stroke at him but he did not flinch. She saw that he was talking to the horse, gently, quietly, with the born confidence of the master.

“Anywhere?” she asked herself again, this time aloud, still watching Beck. “Why,”—eyes lighting in surprise that was almost astonishment—“it might be . . . *might* be!”

CHAPTER IV

THE CHAMPION

BECK was still busy with the horses when Jane appeared, bareheaded and clad in a riding habit. He had separated the unbroken stock from the horses that had been turned loose for the winter and was playing with these last, overcoming the shyness that months on the range had engendered.

As she stopped at the corral he walked toward her, studying her face. There was no trace of confusion or embarrassment and for all he could discern she might have had her mind on horses only since early forenoon. That puzzled him because, though he was far from certain, he had felt that the scene which he had interrupted had caused her distress. Still, he reminded himself, this was not the type of woman he knew. She was completely strange to him; good margin, that, for coming to mistaken conclusions.

"These, ma'am, are the gentle horses," he explained. "I cut 'em out for you. They're some of the best you've got."

"They're rough, of course," she remarked after eyeing the animals a moment and he looked at her sharply because her manner was of one who is familiar with horses, "but nothing here looks particularly good. Are these all you brought in?"

"I cut the rest into the little corral. There's some good ones there, but they ain't gentle."

They walked toward the other enclosure and at their approach the colts gave evidence of alarm.

"Now that brown horse 's been ridden some —"

"But what about the sorrel?" she broke in as a shapely head with a white star between the eyes and a flowing fore-

lock tossed back over delicate ears rose above the mass of backs.

"Him, ma'am? He's probably the best colt you own; got the makin's of a fine horse, but he's a bad actor."

Just then the crowding of the horses broke into a milling and the sorrel came into full view. A beautiful beast with white stockings behind, deep chest, high withers, short, straight back.

"He's a beauty!" she declared. "He has bone and leg. He's gaunt now; not enough belly, but I suppose that's because he's been on the range. I like that square hipped sort when you can get its strength without sacrificing looks."

"You're acquainted with horses somewhat, I take it."

"I've ridden some; hunted a little. Can you bring him out?"

Beck entered the corral and roped the horse. For an instant he resisted, head flung back and feet securely planted; then he came out of the bunch on a trot.

"He knows what a rope is. It don't take an intelligent creature, man or beast, long to learn."

The horse stood watching him suspiciously, ready to run if given the opportunity.

"Where shall we try him?" Jane asked.

"In the big corral," he replied and led the sorrel through the gate.

The colt, closely snubbed, stood trembling while the blanket was put on; then flinched and breathed loudly as the weight of the saddle was gently placed on his back. He stepped about and kicked as the cinch was drawn tight and resisted a long time the efforts of the man to slip a bit between his teeth.

Jane stood by watching, her attention divided between admiration of the man and the horse. The former was assured, gentle, positive in every move; the latter alarmed, rebellious but recognized the fact that he was under control.

"Now, if you'll shorten the stirrups I'll try him," she said.

"*You'll* try him, ma'am? Why, this horse ain't been ridden three times in his life. He'll buck an' buck hard."

"So much more reason why I should try him. We spoke of reputations last night; they can only be formed at the cost of knocks. There are many things I must try to do out here; there are bound to be some that I can't even try but this is not one."

"But you —"

"Must I order you to let me ride him?"

There was no lightness in the question; she meant business, Beck realized. And her brusqueness delighted him for when he turned to give the cinch one more hitch — his only reply to her question — he was smiling merrily.

It was not much of a ride as western riding goes. Beck blindfolded the sorrel with the black silk scarf he wore about his neck, helped Jane to mount, saw that she had both stirrups, took the rope cautiously from the trembling bronco's neck and, at her nod, drew off the blind.

For a moment the great colt stood there as if bewildered. Then, with a grunt and a bound, he bowed his back, hung his head and pitched.

"Keep his head up! His head!" warned Beck, watching with intense interest. "Watch him . . ."

The horse went straight forward for a half dozen jumps. Erect in the saddle, sitting too far back, trusting too much to her stirrups, Jane rode.

The violence of the lunging jerked her head unmercifully but she had her balance. . . . Until he sunfished, with a wrenching movement that heaved her forward against the fork, dangerously near a fall.

"Grab it all!" called Beck, not remembering that his injunction to hang on was as Greek to her. "He — Look out!"

With a vicious fling of his whole body the sorrel swapped ends and as he came down, head toward the man, the girl shot into the air, turned completely over and struck full on her back.

Beck ran to her, heedless of the horse, which circled at a gallop. She lay very still with her eyes closed; a smudge of dirt was on her white cheek. He knelt beside her.

"Are you hurt, ma'am?" he asked, and when she did not reply raised her head to his knee. Her body was surprisingly light, surprisingly firm, as he held it with an arm beneath her shoulders. He was fumbling with her collar to open it, knuckles against her soft throat, when she opened her eyes and gasped and coughed. She tried to speak but for a moment continued to choke; then smiled and said weakly:

"I didn't . . . ride him."

"But you made a fine try!" he said with more enthusiasm than she had seen him display. "And I sure *am* glad you ain't hurt bad!"

She laughed feebly and he felt her breath on his cheek, for their faces were very close; he felt his heart leap, too, and helped her up, saying words of which he was not conscious.

"I can stand alone," she said after he had steadied her an interval and reluctantly he took his arm from about her. "I'd like to try him again."

"But you're not going to, not to-day. I'm giving you that order,"—with resolution. "I wouldn't want you to be hurt, ma'am. I—"

He checked himself, realizing that he had become very earnest and that she was looking straight into his eyes, reading the concern that was there.

There was talk of that ride in the bunkhouse when the men came in. Jimmy Oliver had seen from a distance and asked Beck for the story. He related the incident rather lightly and ended:

"Tried to keep her off him, but only got orders to take orders. If she breaks her neck tryin' some such tricks, I wouldn't be surprised."

"She appears to have sand, though," Oliver commented, as though he were making a concession.

Others had opinions to pass, briefly, to the point. Those men were not given to accepting readily a stranger and this stranger, being a woman, came to them under an added handicap. Where a man, inept and showing the same courage, might have found himself quietly accepted, Jane's attempt at riding was not received with noticeable warmth. The performance was in her favor, and that was about all that could be said.

A close observer might have noticed that Tom Beck gave attention whenever another spoke of their new boss, as though deeply interested in what the men had to say. Yet when he spoke of her, his manner was rather disparaging.

Mail had come in that afternoon and, a happening without precedent, there were two letters for Two-Bits. The man, who could not write and whose reading was limited to brands, never received mail and before he arrived there was speculation as to the writer of the one letter. Of the other there was no mystery because each man of the outfit had received a similar envelope containing a circular letter from a boot manufacturer.

Two-Bits arrived late, riding slowly toward the corral with his eyes on the ranch house for a possible look at his fair employer.

"Mail for you, Two-Bits," Curtis remarked casually as he entered.

The others concealed their interest while Beck handed the letters to Two-Bits, who stood eyeing them gravely, striving to cover his surprise. This could not be done, though, for his agitated Adam's apple gave him away as he stood with a letter in each hand, looking from one to the other.

"I'll bet two-bits somebody's dead," he said with concern, then walked to the window under a growing sense of importance at his deluge of correspondence.

He opened the letter which they knew contained the solicitation of the maker of boots and all watched him as he stood

scowling at it for minutes. He folded the sheet with a sigh and stuffed it, with the other letter, into his *chap* pocket and walked thoughtfully to his bunk, sitting down heavily, elbows on his knees. He shook his head sorrowfully and made a depreciatory clicking with his tongue.

"Boys, I always knowed that girl'd turn out a bad one! It's awful. . . . An' her mother a lady!"

For a moment their restraint held and then their laughter cut loose with a roar. Curtis fell face down on his bunk and laughed until his entire length shook. Jimmy Oliver gasped for breath, hands across his stomach, and the others reeled about the floor or leaned against the walls, weak with mirth.

"It ain't nothin' to laugh at!" Two-Bits protested, but when he failed to convince them of the gravity he shammed, he rose and permitted an abashed grin to distort his freckled face, muttered something about feeding his horse and walked out.

It was Saturday evening in a season of light work and the social diversions of Ute Crossing had called H C riders. Hepburn departed early and after their horses had eaten Beck and Two-Bits rode out of the ranch townward bound. Out of sight of the building Two-Bits said:

"Tom, my eyes ain't very good. I'd like to get you to read this here other letter for me."

Beck knew that such confidence was high compliment for Two-Bits was sensitive over his educational shortcomings, so he took the letter and, after glancing down the single page, said:

"This is from the Reverend Azariah Beal."

"Oh, my gosh! That's my brother! What's the matter with him, Tom?"

The other read as follows:

My dear Brother: — God willing, I shall visit you. I have often been impelled to renew our fraternal relationships but my various charges have demanded my sole attention.

Now, however, I am on a brief sojourn in the marts of trade and my interests call me in your direction. I expect to arrive shortly after you receive this. May the Almighty guard and bless thee and keep thee safe until our hands meet in the clasp of brotherly love.

"Oh, my gosh!" cried Two-Bits again, Adam's apple leaping and his gray eyes, usually so mild, alight with enthusiasm. "He's comin' to visit me. Gosh, Tom, but he's a smart man! Ain't that elegant language? Say, he's the smartest man in our family an' he's comin' clean from Texas to see me."

"How long since you've seen him?"

"Oh, quite a while. Since I was three years old."

"And how long ago was that?"

"You got me. I heard about him. He's a preacher. My, oh my, but *she*'ll like him. He's smart, like she is."

His manner was high elation and he spoke breathlessly, and while they trotted on he chattered in his high voice, eulogizing the virtues of this brother he had not seen since infancy, regaling the other with long and vague tales of his accomplishments. Pressed for details he could not offer them because his knowledge of the relative had come to him verbally through the devious channels of the cattle country, but this did not shake his conviction that the Reverend Beal was peerless.

Tom's mind was not on the extravagant talk of Two-Bits. Curiously, it persisted in thinking of Jane Hunter.

Two days before he had thought this girl from the east was a rattle-brained piece of inconsequence with her selection of a foreman by the drawing of straws. Now he was not so sure that she did not possess at least several admirable qualities. He had offended her, gently bullied her, only last evening; he had sensed the waning of her own feeling of superiority, had understood that, behind her pique, she took to heart the things he had said, things which he had said not

because he thought she should know them but because he wanted to see how she would react to blunt truths.

She wanted something very badly. Not money; that had been a means. Perhaps it was that vague thing, *Herself*, of which he had spoken. He did not understand, but he liked her determination. . . . And what was this other stranger, this man, to her?

He put his horse into a lope with a queer misgiving. He was taking this woman seriously! He was saying slighting things about her and yet hoping that other men would speak about her highly! He had never taken many things — particularly women — seriously before and his experience with women had not been meager. It frightened him. . . .

They dismounted before the saloon which adjoined the hotel, eased their cinches and approached the doorway.

In the shadow of the next building two men were talking and Beck eyed the figures closely. One, he knew, was Hepburn, and the other, from the intonation of his cautiously lowered voice, he took to be Pat Webb, the rancher of whom he had spoken to Jane Hunter, telling her that his presence in the country was not an asset for her.

He went inside, rather absorbed. Sam McKee was there, one of Webb's riders, the one on whom Beck had inflicted terrible punishment for cruelty to a horse. McKee looked away, a nasty light playing across his gray eyes, but Beck did not even give him a glance. What was Hepburn doing in close talk with Webb? he asked himself. For years Webb had been under suspicion as a thief and a friend of the lawless. Colonel Hunter had never trusted him, and now the foreman of the H C was talking with him, secretly. . . .

A moment later Hepburn entered and lounged up to the bar and shortly afterwards Webb came in. He was a small man with sharp features and bright, button-like eyes which roved restlessly. His skin was mottled, his lips hard and cruel; his body seemed to be all nerves for he was in constant motion.

Webb ordered a drink and glanced about, eyeing Beck and Two-Bits with a suggestive smile. He drank with a swagger and wiped his lips with a sharp smack, still smiling as though some unpleasant thought amused him.

A man at the far end of the bar moved closer to Hepburn.

"How's the new boss?" he said with a grin, and Hepburn said, in his benevolent manner, that he believed she would do very well.

Others, interested, came closer and more questions followed. Then Webb broke in:

"I shouldn't think that you H C waddies 'uld be in town nights any more,"—his glittering eyes on them rather jubilantly.

The talk stopped, for Webb, unsavory as to reputation, was still a figure in the country and his manner as he spoke was laden with significance.

"How's that, Webb?" Hepburn asked.

"How's that!" the other mocked. "I've seen her, ain't that enough? There's only two reasons why men want to come to this hole nights; one's booze, an' th' other's women. You can carry your booze out home an'—"

He went on with his blackguard inference and when he had ended a laugh went up, a ribald, obscene, barroom laugh. It had reached its height when Tom Beck, whose eyes had been on Hepburn as Webb gave voice to his insult, elbowed the foreman from his way and faced the one who had occasioned that laugh.

There was in his manner a quality which caught attention like nippers.

He stood, forcing Webb to look into his threatening face a quiet instant. Then he spoke:

"That's a lie!"

The bantering smile swept from the other's face and his mouth drew down in a slanting snarl.

"What's a lie?"

"What you said is a lie, Webb, an' you're a liar—"

The smaller man's hand whipped to his holster and Beck, breaking short, closed on him, fingers like steel gripping the ready wrist.

"Don't try that with me, you rat!"

With a steady pull he lifted the resisting hand which gripped the gun away from the man's side while Webb struggled, cursing as he found himself unable to resist that strength.

"Give me that gun!"

Beck wrenched the weapon free. The group had drawn back and behind him Sam McKee made a quick movement. Two-Bits, beside him, dropped his hand to his hip and muttered:

"Keep out of this!"

McKee, hate flickering in his face, subsided, without protest, as a craven will.

Tom broke the gun and the cartridges scattered on the floor. He closed it with a snap and sent it spinning down the bar, clear to the far end. His eyes had not left Webb's face.

"You're a liar," he said again quietly. "You're a liar and you're going to tell all the boys here that you're a liar."

"Don't tell me I lie!"—retreating a step as Beck's body swayed toward him.

"You lied," Tom said quietly, though his voice was not just steady. His hands were clenched and he held them slightly before his body as though yearning for opportunity to seize upon and injure the other.

"What is it to you, anyhow, if—"

"It's this to me, Webb: It makes me want to strangle the foul breath in your throat! That's what it is to me an' before these boys I will if you don't swallow your own dirty words just to get their taste.

"I don't want to be a killer, even over such as you are, but you've got me mad. We don't know an' nobody else knows how this girl's goin' to make it in this country, but, by God, Webb, she's goin' to have a fair chance. There

ain't going to be any rotten talk that ain't called for an' it ain't called for . . . yet.

"I expect I'd get into trouble if I killed you for this. There's just one chance for me to keep out of trouble, and that's for you to say you lied!"

He moved closer as Webb retreated slowly, his spurs ringing ever so slightly, yet their sound was audible in the stillness.

"Say it!" he insisted. "Say it, you whelp!"

Webb's face had gone from red to the color of suet and the blotches stood sharply out against the pallor. His dirty assurance was beaten down and before this man he was frightened . . . and enraged at his own fright.

"Mebby I spoke too quick—"

"You lied! Nothin' short of that! Say you lied and say it now. . . . Quick!"

He half lurched forward, lifting his eager, vengeful hands, when Webb relaxed and gave a short, half laugh and said:

"Have it your own way. I lied, I guess. I didn't mean—"

"That'll do, Webb. You've said all that's necessary."

He stood back and dropped his hands limply to his side, eyeing the other with dying wrath. His gaze then went to Hepburn and clung there a moment, eloquent of contempt and he might as well have said: "You're her foreman. Why didn't *you* take this up?"

Then he moved to the bar and asked for a drink. Constrained talk arose. Webb sulkily recovered his gun and stood close to Sam McKee, drinking. From the doorway which led into the hotel office Dick Hilton turned back, whistling lowly to himself, a speculative whistle.

Tom Beck rode home alone, hours before he had intended to leave town. Why had he done that? Always he had disliked Webb but why had this thing roused in him such tremendous rage? he asked as he unsaddled.

He laughed softly to himself as though he had done some-

thing ridiculous; then he strolled down toward the creek and stood under the cottonwoods a long interval, watching a lighted chamber window.

"You're a queer little yellow-head," he said aloud to that window. "You're the kind that gets men into trouble, but maybe you're . . . worth it, a lot of it."

He stood for some time, until his wrath had wholly gone and the mood which sent merriment dancing in his eyes had returned. It had been a day of understanding: he had broken down the barrier of deceit which Hepburn had attempted to build, he had come to understand that there was something strange in the pursuit of Jane Hunter by Dick Hilton, he had understood that in his employer was at least a physical courage which was promising, he had humiliated Webb and given the whole country to understand that there should be no doubting of the new girl's reputation.

Of those incidents the only one now giving him concern was the attitude of the foreman. His suspicion was strong, his evidence wholly inadequate.

Tom stood beside his bunk for a time. He had thrown down his gauntlet; he had taken a chance. He might, from now on, face danger or humiliation but he experienced a relief at knowledge that so far as he was concerned there was no longer anything under cover. He did not fear Hepburn or Webb so far as his own safety went. But there were other things, he told himself.

What *was* up? Just what game would Hepburn play . . . if any? And who was that man from the East? To what was Jane's confusion due that afternoon? Was it only embarrassment? Only?

He dozed off and woke with a start. Again he felt the weight of her body on his arm, again the warmth of her breath on his cheek. He lay there with his heart hammering, then, with a growl, rolled over and went to sleep.

Well he could that night! But other nights were coming when he would ponder the significance of Hilton, when the cloud which he then saw vaguely over Jane Hunter's future

would be real and appalling, when he would actually feel her body in his arms, when her warm breath would mingle with her warm tears on his cheek, when he would hope that death might come to him as a tribute to her. Oh, yes, Tom Beck could put it all aside and sleep this night, but there were others coming . . . other nights. . . .

CHAPTER V

THE COURTING

JANE HUNTER was in work up to her trim elbows. She had little time for anything else. Twice again Dick Hilton came to see her, riding a horse in the second visit, but his stays were not lengthy . . . and not satisfactory, because the girl had little thought for anything but ranch affairs.

For long hours she sat at the desk which she had placed in a bay window that commanded a superb view of far ridges and pored over records she had found. She discovered a detailed diary of events for the past ten years, a voluminous chronicle kept more for the sake of giving self-expression to the old colonel than for an efficient record, but it served her well as a key to the fortunes of the property.

From time to time she sent for one of her men and quizzed him rigidly on some phase of the work with which he was particularly familiar, never satisfied until she had learned all that he could teach her. Every evening Hepburn sat with her and discussed ranch affairs at length, Jane forcing him into argument to defend his statements.

While with the girl Dad maintained his paternal, patronizing attitude, yet he was not content, as was evident from the moroseness which he displayed before the men. He had been stripped of initiative until his authority was reduced to executing orders; this, despite the fact that Jane depended on him for most of her information.

Beck watched the foreman's attitude carefully. Hepburn was chagrined, yet dogged, as though staying on and accepting the situation for definite purpose. It had been decided after Jane had argued away Hepburn's objections that

Beck was to have a free hand with the horses, gathering the saddle stock and getting it in shape for the summer's work, breaking young horses, watching the mares and colts. This made it unnecessary for Beck to look to the older man for detailed orders and delayed the clashes which were bound to come between them.

Jane's approach to her responsibilities was considered admirable by the men, but it occasioned little comment. Their judgment of her was still suspended; that is, with the exception of Two-Bits. Her first look had won him without reservation.

"She's smart!" he declared at frequent intervals. "She's the smartest girl I've ever seen . . . an' the love-liest!" The last with a drop in the voice which provoked laughter.

Once he said to Beck:

"My gosh, Tommy, how'd you like to have wife like her?"

The other smiled cryptically.

"Now you're gettin' into a profound subject," he said. "It ain't wise to pick out a wife like you'd pick out a horse. There ain't much can fool a man who knows horses when he looks one over careful-like, but there's a lot about women that you can't know by lookin' 'em over and watching 'em step."

He was watching Jane "step" and though he still was the first to listen when others spoke of her qualities his manner toward her was the least flattering of any.

After she had ridden the sorrel twice, each time accompanied by Beck or Hepburn she sent Two-Bits to saddle him.

"What you doing with that horse?" Beck asked, looking up from the hoof of a colt which he pared gently to reveal some hidden infection.

"She wants him to ride," the cowboy explained.

"Goin' alone?"

"Guess so."

"Then take that saddle off and put it on the little pinto."

"But she said to—"

"Makes no difference. You take it off or I'll make you look like two bits, Mex!"

On finding her order miscarried Jane demanded explanation.

"Tommy, he told me," Two-Bits said, uneasily.

"But I ordered the sorrel—"

"And I told Two-Bits to give you this paint, ma'am," Beck said, the foot of the colt still between his knees.

"And why?"—with a show of spirit.

"Because you ain't up to him yet and he ain't down to you. If somebody was with you, it'd be different. You can't ride him alone, ma'am."

She gave her head an indignant toss and was about to demand the execution of her plan but he turned back to his work, talking gently to the animal. Then with a grudgingly resigned sigh she walked toward the pinto, for there was something about Beck that precluded argument.

Again she told him of a contemplated visit to the ranches further down the creek.

"Why, ma'am?" he asked.

"There are many things to talk over, plans for the summer's work and the like. Besides, I want to become acquainted."

He smiled and said:

"That last is fine, but I guess you'd better wait for the rest."

"Wait? What for?"

"Until you know, ma'am. You see, you've only been here a little while; you've learned a lot, but you don't know enough to talk business with anybody yet. It won't be good for you to go talking about something you don't understand."

"I think I am capable of judging that," she said brusksly.

"I will go."

But she did not. She had intended to go the next day but as she lay awake that morning she told herself that he had been right, she did not know enough about her affairs to discuss her relationships with neighbors intelligently. She still smarted from his frankness, but the hurt was leavened by a feeling that behind his presumption had been thought of her own welfare.

She tired quickly in the first days that she rode and once, remarking on it, she drew this advice from Beck:

"You'd do a lot better without corsets."

Simply, bluntly, impersonally and with so much assurance that she could not even reply. His observation had smacked of no disagreeable intimacy. She had told him that she tired; he had given her his idea of the cause.

She took off her corsets.

A day of cold rain came on; at noon the downpour abated for a time and Jane asked Hepburn to ride down the creek with her to look over land that was to be cleared and irrigated.

"Have you got a slicker, ma'am?" Beck asked when she requested that a horse be saddled.

She had none.

"There ain't an extra one on the place," he said, "so I guess you'd better not go."

"But the rain is over. Anyhow, what hurt will a wetting do?"

"I don't guess the rain's all over," he said. "And to get wet and cold ain't a good thing for anybody; it'd be a mighty bad thing for you. You're a city woman; you can't do these things yet."

An exasperating sense of inferiority came over her, bringing a helpless sort of rage. This man was not even her foreman and yet he brought her up short, time after time. She started to tell him so, but changed her mind. Also, she changed her plans for the day.

He was not rough, not obtrusive in any of this. Just

frank and simple, and when she bridled under it all she saw that twinkle creep into his eye, as though she were a child and her spirit amused him!

But she did more than amuse. She could not see, she could not know; nights he roused from sleep and lay awake trying to fathom the sensations he experienced; days he rode without sufficient thought for the work that was before him. At times he was impelled to be irritable toward her and this because his stronger impulse was to be gentle!

He did not want to care for this woman and he found himself caring in spite of himself! He rode to town and spent an evening with a waitress from the hotel, taking her to a picture show, paying her broad compliments, seeing her pride rise because of his attentions, and he rode home before daylight, disgusted with himself. His life was being reshaped, his tastes, his desires. His caution against taking chances was being beaten down.

She commenced to ride with him regularly and these rides grew longer as she found her body becoming toughened and her endurance greater until they were together many hours each day, until, in fact, escorting her had become Beck's job. The ostensible purpose of this was to learn the country and the manner of range work but though she did learn rapidly their talk was largely personal. Beck was not responsive and the more reserved he became the greater Jane's efforts to force him to talk of himself.

These efforts netted her little and after a time she gave up, tentatively, and adopted other means of winning his confidence.

Once she helped him gather a bunch of horses that had not been corraled for seasons. The way led down a steep point and Jane was ahead, holding up the bunch while Beck crowded them from behind. She took the descent with a degree of hesitation for the going—so steep that she was forced to clamp a hand behind her cantle to re-

tain a seat — chilled her with fear. On the level she fanned the sorrel and kept ahead of the horses until she could lead them safely into a corral.

The gate closed, Jane looked at Beck with sparkling eyes, expecting a word of reward, but he only said:

"You've got to keep goin' with horses. The country's all got to look level to you. You slowed up bustin' off that point."

The rebuke hurt her . . . and stimulated her ambition.

He taught her to use a rifle and she brought down her first deer, a yearling buck, at long range.

"I told you to hold just behind his shoulder; see where you hit," he said, indicating the wound, a hand's breadth too far back.

She shot with his revolver and he told her that she would never learn to use the weapon. She bade him teach her the rudiments of roping and he decried the woman movements of arms and body.

In all this he was quick to criticise, niggardly of praise; ready to teach, reluctant to grant progress.

She was resentful but her resentment was no match for her determination. Now and then his rebukes whipped flushes to her cheeks and more than once she left him with tears standing in her eyes, only to tell herself aloud that she *would* make him acknowledge her accomplishments. . . .

Once, riding on alone after Jane had turned back toward the ranch Beck encountered Sam McKee. The man had dismounted and was recinching when Tom passed him. He looked up with that baleful expression, as though he was impelled to do the H C rider great harm and held back only by his cowardice. When Tom had passed McKee mounted and before he started on his way he turned to shout over his shoulder:

"Chaperone!"

In it he put all that contempt which small, timid boys put into their shouted taunts.

Beck was not angered but that gave him something to think about.

Another time as, on his roan, he led the sorrel toward the gate to the houseyard he saw Hepburn smiling at him with scornful humour and when the foreman saw that Beck had seen he said:

"A regular chaperone, ain't you?"

Tom did not reply though it roiled him. He thought about the remark at length but the thing which interested him was that Hepburn had used the same word that McKee had used. . . . Was that, he asked himself, mere chance?

They had ridden far to the eastward one afternoon and returning long after dark Jane made a meal herself and they ate together at her table. Beck was noticeably restrained and when finished hastened to leave.

"Can't you sit and talk with me a while?" she asked.

"I could, ma'am, but is it necessary?"

"Not necessary to the business, perhaps, but it might mean a pleasant evening for me."

He gave her steady gaze for steady gaze and then said:

"Anybody would think you were courtin' me, ma'am."

She laughed easily, yet her gaze wavered. She asked:

"And what if I should be?"

This disconcerted him but he replied:

"It's likely I'd quit."

"I'm . . . wholly distasteful to you, then?"

"If I was to say yes, it'd hurt your feelings, needless. So I won't. I don't mind tellin' you, though, that the country is calling me your chaperone."

"And does what people say worry you?"

"Not when they talk about something that I'm responsible for. I didn't hire out as a . . . a companion, ma'am."

She stepped closer, hands behind her and said:

"The first time you talked to me at any length you had a great deal to say about respect. No one had ever talked to me as you did. I took it because it was true . . . and I respected you."

"Since that time I have been trying to be worthy of the respect of you men; of yours particularly because you are the only one with whom I have talked so frankly about myself. But at every turn you repulse me, drive me back. Nothing that I do seems to be pleasing to you. You pick on me, Tom Beck! Why do you do it?"

He eyed her calculatingly.

"What would you think if I told you that it was because I don't like you?"

"I would think it was not the truth."

He flushed and this time his eyes fell from hers.

"I would think just that, but I might be wrong." She breathed rapidly, one hand on a gold locket that was at her throat. "I might think that you fear that becoming my friend would be taking a chance . . . but I might not want to think that.

"You were the first man who ever dared tell me just how little I have amounted to. You are the first individual that ever made me feel ashamed of myself. You did those things; you opened my eyes, you showed me what real achievement is.

"Now I'm fighting for a place. I have won one thing: my self respect. Now I'm going to win another: the respect of other people and if I can win their respect I can win their friendship.

"I may be overconfident. Time will prove that. But there is one thing I want, Tom Beck, and that is your friendship. Before I get through, and if I succeed, you are going to be glad to be my . . . friend!"

There was challenge in her tone, which, withal its assurance, was sweet and gentle, almost appealing; and that combination of qualities indicated that her words did not express her whole thought. It steeled him and with that mocking twinkle again he said:

"You seem quite sure, ma'am."

"As sure as I have ever been of anything in my life!"

But her assurance did not compare with her desire, for

when he had gone she was seized with the fear that she had said too much, had gone too far. And that which she had boasted would be hers was to Jane Hunter a precious possession.

CHAPTER VI

OUTCASTS

AT sunset a girl rider descended from the uplands into the shadows of Devil's Hole. The big brown which carried her picked his way slowly down the treacherous trail, nose low, ears forward, selecting his footing with care.

The girl sat braced back in her saddle. Her face was dark, eyes filled with a brooding, but the mouth though sternly set showed a rueful droop at the corners.

Her mind was not on her progress. She was lost in a very definite consideration, something which stirred resentment, it was evident from her face. Finally she drew a sharp deep breath of impatience.

"Oh, get along, you dromedary!" she muttered and rowelled her horse sharply.

The big beast sprang forward with a grunt and went down the trail in long, shaking bounds, even more intent on his footing, than before and when they reached the level he crashed through the brush at a high lope, leaping little washes with great lunges and bearing his light rider swiftly toward the cabin from which a whisp of smoke curled.

The discouraged looking man stood before the doorway watching her come and as the girl swung down, before the horse was well halted, she flashed a quick smile at him.

"I heerd you comin', daughter, away back thar. I shore thought the devil himself might 've been after you!"

He smiled wanly.

"I seen her again," the girl said as she dragged her saddle off.

The man pulled languidly at his mustache.

"She see you?"

"No. I set under a juniper and watched 'em . . . her an' that Beck man."

"Mebby if you was to talk to her an' get friendly—"

"I don't want to be no friends with her! I hate her already!"

She spat out the words and her face was a storm of dislike.

"What I meant . . . mebby 't would be easier for us if you played like you was friends. Then she mightn't suspect."

She rolled her saddle to its side and spread the blanket over it.

"No. I can't do things that-a way, Alf,"—with a slow shake of her head. "Mebby 't would get us more . . . but there's somethin' in me, in here,"—a palm to her breast—"that won't let me. I can steal her blind an' only be glad about it, but I couldn't make up like I was her friend while I done it."

"Mebby . . . mebby you would sure enough like her," he persisted. "You ain't never had no friends—"

"I'd never like her, not while we're this way,"—with a gesture to include the litter about the cabin. "She's got all that I want. She's had all the things I've never had. She's got clothes, lots of pretty clothes; she's lived in towns an's always had things easy. She's got friends and folks to respect her. You can tell that by lookin' at her. . . ."

"What makes me that way, Alf? What makes me hate folks that have got the things I want?"

He pulled on his mustache again and scanned the scarlet sky which rose above the purple heights to the westward. He shook his head rather helplessly and then looked at the girl who stood before him, the eagerness of her query showing in her eyes with an intensity that was almost desperate.

"Mebby you get it from me. I've had it . . . always. That's all I have had . . . that an' hard luck."

"But I don't like it!" she said and in the tone was something of the spirit of a bewildered little girl. "I'd like to be like other girls. I'd like to have friends . . . girl friends, but the more I want 'em, the more I hate those that have 'em!"

"What's the matter with me, Alf?"

"The same thing that's the matter with me, daughter: hard luck. I've wanted things so bad that not hevin' 'em has soured me. I've watched other outfits grow big an' rich an' nothin' like that has ever come my way. The bigger the rest got, the harder 't was for me to get along . . . an' the worse I hated 'em!"

There was no iron in his voice; just the whine of a weakling, dispirited to a point where his resentment at ill fortune, even, was a passive thing.

"Why, she's got a fine house to live in, an' I'll bet she always had. She's never knowed what it was to set out a norther in a wagon. She's never lived on buckskin an' frozen spuds all winter. She's never been chased from one place to another. . . .

"Folks respect her for what she's got. Why don't folks get respected for just what they are?"

There was pathos in that query.

The man answered:

"It ain't what you are that matters, daughter. It's what you own."

"You've always said that, ever since I can remember. Mebby if you hadn't said it so much, Alf, I wouldn't feel like I do."

He shifted his footing uneasily and looked again at the flaring sky.

"Well, it's so," he whined. "You'd have found it out yourself. I've brung you up the best I knowed how."

"Oh, Alf! I didn't mean I was finding fault! Damned if you *ain't* brought me up good! Why, you're the only friend I got Alf! What'd I do without you? You're the only one I've ever knowed . . . real well. You're the only

one who's ever been good to me!" She put her hands on his shoulders and looked into his face with a smile of genuine affection. "Good old Alf! We've been pals, ain't we?"

He nodded, and said:

"An' if you stick to me a little mite longer, you'll have enough.

"You're brighter'n I be, daughter. You got a longer head. Now's your chanct to use it!" He looked about, somewhat nervously, as if they might be overheard. "Sometimes I get afeerd. Lately, since we've come here, I've been afeerd. It's the only time I ever let anybody else know what my plans was an' it makes me feel creepy to think somebody else *knows*!"

"'Fraid of what, Alf?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Gettin' caught again, an'—"

"Oh, but you won't! You can't. Alf, you can't get caught an' sent to jail an' leave me alone again!"

She spoke in a whisper and gripped her fist for emphasis.

"I shore don't want to leave you, daughter. I shore don't want to get catched. That's where you come in . . . helpin' me scheme! I ain't afeerd of havin' 'em come up on me an' git me red-handed so much as I am of havin' somebody else know what's goin' on."

"But he sent for us. He told us the outfit was goin' to be owned by a tenderfoot. He's as much in danger as we, ain't he?"

Her father nodded slowly.

"You're right . . . in a way, but if it ever come to a show-down, I'd be the one to hold th' bag, wouldn't I? That's what we got to watch out for. 'Course, it's easy pickin', with this gal tryin' to run things herself, an' what with her brand workin' over into ourn so easy, there ain't many chances. . . . Except havin' somebody else to know."

"If anybody ever was to double cross you, Alf, I'd get 'em if it was the last thing I done!"

That threat carried conviction and her father looked at her with a rare brand of admiration in his eyes.

"Lord, daughter, sometimes I think you was meant to be a man . . . an' a hard man! Sometimes you almost scare me, th' way you say things!"

She made no reply and he said:

"All we got to do is go slow. A brandin' iron has built many a fortune, an' nobody ever had it any easier 'n us."

"Do you think we'll ever get rich enough, Alf, to have a regular house? An' be respected by folks?"

"Luck's bound to change sometime," he muttered.

"Ours has been bad a long time . . . a long, long time."

He gathered an arm load of wood and entered the cabin. The girl stood alone a long time, watching the brilliant flowering of the sky sink slowly into the west, drawing steely night to cover its garden. A sharp star bored its way through the failing light and stood half way between earth and heaven. A vagrant breeze slid down the creek, bringing with it the breath of sage, and afar off somewhere a cow bawled plaintively.

"She has 'em," she muttered to herself. "Friends . . . an' respect . . . an' everything I want. . . ."

"I wonder what makes me hate folks so. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

THE CATAMOUNT

THREE weeks after her arrival Jane made her first trip to town and Beck drove the pair of strong bays which swirled their buckboard over the road at a spanking trot.

Events had arisen to prevent their being together in the days immediately following the frank discussion of their attitudes toward one another and Jane thought that she detected a feeling of curiosity in him, as though he wondered just how she would go about forcing him to like her. Shrewdly, she avoided personalities and talked much of the ranch.

When they broke over the divide and began the long drop into town, he said:

"Since you asked advice from me, I keep thinkin' up more, ma'am."

"That's nice. I need it. What now?"

"I s'pose Dad mentioned that water in Devil's Hole?"

"Why, I don't recall it. We've talked so much and about so many things that perhaps it's slipped my mind."

"Maybe. He said he had."

She questioned him further but he said it might be well for her to mention it to Hepburn. "He's foreman, you know."

They swung into the one street of Ute Crossing and stopped before the bank. As Beck stepped down to tie the team a girl came out of a store across the way and vaulted into the saddle on a big brown horse with graceful ease. It was the nester's daughter.

Two men came from the saloon just as she reined her

horse about. They eyed her insolently with that stare of a type of loafer which is eloquent of all that is despicable and one of them, a short, stodgy man, smiled brazenly.

The girl gave them one stare, hostility in her brown eyes, and then looked away, her lips moving in an unheard word, surely of contempt.

Then the man spoke. It is not well to repeat. His words were few, but they were ugly. The girl had touched her horse with a spur and he leaped forward. Just that one bound. As he made it the man spoke and with a wrench she set the brown back on his haunches and whirled him about. Her face was suddenly white, her lips in a tight, red line, and her eyes blazed.

She rode back to the men, who had continued on their way, holding her horse to a mincing trot, for he seemed to have caught the tensivity of her mood.

"Did I hear you right?" she said to the man who had spoken.

He stood still and looked up with the rude leer.

"That depends on your ears, likely. All I said was that you —"

She did not give him time to repeat. Her right arm flashed up and the quirt, slung to its wrist, hissed angrily as it cut back and with a stinging crack wound its thong about the man's face.

"Take that!" she cried. "And that . . . and that!"

At the first blow the man ducked and turned, throwing up his hands to guard, and as other slashes, relentless, rapid, of scourging vigor, fell upon his head and face and neck, he doubled over and ran for the shelter of a store. But the girl's wrath was not satisfied. She sent the big horse from street to sidewalk where his hoofs thundered on the planks, crowded in between her quarry and the building fronts, cutting off his flight, striking faster, harder, teeth showing now between her drawn lips.

The man fled into the street again, but she followed, guiding her horse without conscious thought, surely, for

no woman roused as her face showed she was roused could have had thought for other than the thrashing she administered. Endangered by the excited hoofs which were all about him as he ducked and dodged in vain to escape, the man ran with hands and arms close about his head, moving them with each blow that fell in futile attempts to save other parts from the cut and smart of that rawhide.

The girl uttered no word. All the rancor, all the rage he had roused by his insult, found vent in the whipping. Her whole lithe torso moved with each stroke as she put into the downward swing all the strength she could command, and across the man's cheek rose broad red welts, contrasting with his pallor of fright, until his face looked like a fancy berry pie.

Scuttling, dodging, doubling, the man worked across the street, turned back time and again but persisting until, with a cry of pain and desperation, he threw out one hand, caught the bridle and in the instant's respite the move gave him stumbled to the other sidewalk, across it and sprawled through the swinging doors of the saloon he had left moments before.

The horse came to a halt with a slam against the flimsy front of the building. The girl drew back her quirt as for a final blow, but the man, regaining his feet, fled through the bar room and disappeared. She dropped her hand to the top of the door, pushed it open and held it so, peering darkly into the room.

People had come into the street to watch. There had been excited shouts and a scream or two, but as the girl sat looking into the place a quick silence shut down and when she spoke her voice, trembling with emotion but scarcely raised above its normal pitch, was easily heard.

"I've took a lot from men," she said, "ever since I was a kid. When I come into this country I thought maybe I'd get a little respect . . . for bein' just a girl. I didn't get it . . . I've got to take it.

"If that man's a sample of the kind you've got here,

you're a nest of skunks. And you talk easy hereafter, every one of you, because so long as I've got a quirt and an arm, I'll hide you till you're raw if you make any breaks like he did. Keep that in mind!"

She released her hold on the door; it swung outward smartly and as it struck the horse he sprang sideways, wheeled, and clearing the shallow gutter with a lunge, swung down the street at a gallop.

When she passed Jane Hunter, who stood amazed in her buckboard, tears showed in the girl's eyes, but her back was as erect, her shoulders as trimly set as though no great emotion was surging in her heart.

"She's quite a catamount, I'll guess," said Tom Beck as he gave the knot in the tie rope a securing tug and turned to face Jane.

His eyes were fired with admiration.

"But a girl —"

"She was magnificent!"

It was Dick Hilton who had interrupted with the words. Beck looked at him and the enthusiasm which had been in his face faded. He eyed the Easterner briefly and turned to adjust a buckle on the harness.

"And only a girl!" exclaimed Jane under her breath. "Dick, did you see it all?"

"A typical Western girl, I should say," he replied. "Your. . . . Your neighbor and associate? Your companion, Jane?" he asked. "The sort you want to cast your lot with?"

"And a moment ago you thought her magnificent!" she taunted as she stepped down and offered him her hand.

"I'll meet you in, say, two hours, ma'am," Beck said.

"Very well; right here," she replied, and he left her as she turned to meet Hilton's unpleasant smile.

They began the return trip shortly after noon. Hilton had been with Jane when Tom returned and he stood beside the buckboard talking some minutes after Beck had

picked up the reins and was ready to commence the drive. Occasionally Dick's eyes wandered from Jane to the other man's face but Tom sat, knees crossed, idly toying with the whip, as indifferent to what was being said as if the others were out of sight and hearing. Hilton made an obvious effort to exclude the Westerner but Beck's disregard of him was as genuine as it was evident. He sat patiently, with an easy sense of superiority and the contrast was not lost on Jane Hunter.

The town was far behind and below them, a mere cluster of miniature buildings, before either spoke. Then it was Jane.

"That girl. . . . There was something splendid about her, wasn't there?"

"There was," he agreed. "She sure expressed her opinion of men in general!"

"A newcomer, evidently."

Beck nodded. "Came in soon after you did, with her father, it looked like."

"And she wins the respect of strange men by blows!" she said.

"He deserved all he got, didn't he?" Besk asked, smiling. "I like to see a bad *hombre* like that get set down by a woman. There's something humiliating about it that counts a lot more than the whippin' she gave him."

"But wouldn't it have spoken more for the chivalry of the country if some man had done it for her?"

"That's likely. But there ain't much chivalry here, ma'am."

"And am I so fortunate as to have enjoyed the protection of what little there is?"

He looked at her blankly.

"I had to come clear to Ute Crossing to learn how one man defended me from the insult of another."

He stirred uneasily on the seat.

"That was nothin'," he growled. "I'd been waiting for a chance to land on Webb for a long time."

He did not look at her and his manner had none of its usual bluntness; clearly he was evasive and, more, uncomfortable.

"First, I want to thank you," Jane said after she had looked at him a moment. "You don't know how a woman such as I am can feel about a thing like that. I think it was the finest thing a man has ever done for me . . . and many men have been trying to do fine things for me for a long time."

She was deeply touched and her voice was not just steady but when Beck did not answer, just looked straight ahead with his tell-tale flush deepening, a delight crept into her eyes and the corners of her pretty mouth quirked.

"Besides, it was a great deal to expect of a man who has made up his mind not to like me!"

They had topped the divide and the sorrels had been fighting the bits. As she spoke Tom gave them their heads and the team swept the buckboard forward with a banging and clatter that would have drowned words anyhow, but the fact that he did not reply gave Jane a feeling of jubilation. Her thrust had pricked his reserve, showing it to be not wholly genuine!

Dick Hilton had told her of the encounter Beck had had with Webb, told it jeeringly as he attempted to impress her with the distasteful phases of her environment. He had failed in that. He had impressed her only with the fact that Tom Beck had gone out of his way, had taken a chance, to protect her standing. Others of her men had heard her insulted, men from other ranches had been there, but of them all Beck had been her champion.

And it was Beck who had bullied her, had doubted her in the face of her best efforts to convince him of fitness! He had even challenged her to make herself his friend!

She had believed before she came into those hills that she knew men of all sorts but now she had found something new. Here was a man who, in her presence, would plot to

humiliate her and yet when she could not see or hear his loyalty and his belief in her were outstanding.

And what was it, she asked herself, that made her pulse leap and her throat tighten? It was not wholly gratitude. It was not merely because he resisted her efforts to win his open regard. Those things were potent influences, surely, but there was something more fundamental about him, a basic quality which she had not before encountered in men; she could not analyze it but daily she had sensed its growing strength. Now she felt it . . . felt, but could not identify.

Two-Bits opened the gate for them and Tom carried her bundles into the house.

At the corral, as Beck unharnessed, the homely cow puncher said:

"Gosh, Tommy, how'd it seem, ridin' all the way to town an' back with her settin' up beside you?"

"Just about like you was there, Two-Bits, only we didn't swear quite so much."

"I got lots of respect for you, Tommy, but I think you're a damned liar."

And Beck chuckled to himself as though, perhaps, the other had been right.

"Two weeks now since he wrote," Two-Bits sighed. "He shore ought to be comin'. Gosh, Tom, but he's a bright man!"

Again that night Jane Hunter looked from a window after the lights in the bunk house had gone out and the place was quiet, to see a tall, silent figure move slowly beneath the cottonwoods, watching the house, pausing at times as if listening. Then it went back through the shadows more rapidly, as though satisfied that all was well.

Many times she had watched this but tonight it seemed of greater significance than ever before. He denied her his friendship; he had made Webb his sworn enemy by defending her (she had not told him that part of the tale she heard in Ute Crossing) and yet disclaimed any great inter-

est in her as a motive. Still, he patrolled her dooryard at night!

A sudden impulse to do something that would *make* him give her that consideration in her presence which he gave before others came to life. His attitude suddenly angered her beyond reason and she felt her body shaking as tears sprang into her eyes. The great thing which she desired was just there, just out of reach and the fact exasperated her, grew, became a fever until, on her knees at the window, hammering the sill with her fists, she cried:

“Tom Beck you’re going to love me!”

CHAPTER VIII

AND NOW, THE CLERGY

TWO-BITS was the last into the bunkhouse the following evening. He had ridden his Nigger horse in from the westward hills and had not come through the big gate so not until he stepped across the threshold were the others aware of his presence.

"Here he is!" said a rider from down the creek who was stopping for the night and the group in the center of the low room broke apart.

"Two-Bits, here's your brother," said Curtis.

A small man stood beside him. He wore a green, battered derby hat, band and binding of which were sadly frayed. He wore spectacles, steel rimmed, over searching gray eyes. He was unshaven. A celluloid collar, buttoned behind, made an overly large cylinder for his wrinkled neck. He wore a frock coat, also green with age, the pockets of which bulged and sagged and their torn corners spoke of long overloading. His overalls, patched and newly washed, were tucked into boots with run-down heels. In his hand he held a fountain pen.

At the entrance of Two-Bits all talk had ceased; at Curtis' introduction, Two-Bits stopped. He swallowed, setting his Adam's apple in sharp vibration. He took off his hat. He flushed and his mild eyes wavered. Then he advanced across the room, extending a limp hand and said in a thin, embarrassed voice:

"Please to meet you, Mister Beal."

Tom Beck bit his lips but one or two of the others laughed outright; they ceased, however, when the Reverend

Beal, in a voice that was tremendously deep and impressive for such a small man, said:

"My brother, I extend to you the right hand of fellowship! It is a deed of God that enables me to look once more into your beloved face after these years of separation. Give me your hand, brother. May the blessings of Heaven descend upon and abide with thee!"

He shook Two-Bits' paw, looking up earnestly into his face, while the blushing became more furious.

"Marvelous are the ways of Providence!" he boomed. "Let us give thanks."

He doffed his hat, and still clinging to Two-Bits' hand, lowered his head.

"Almighty Father, whose blessings are diverse and manifold, we, brothers of the flesh, give our thanks to Thee for bringing about this reunion on earth. We realize, oh Lord, that these mundane moments are but brief forerunners of greater joys that are to come, that they are but passing pleasures; but joy here below is a rare thing and from this valley of tears and sin we lift our hearts and our voices in thanks that such blessings have been visited upon us by Thy blessed magnanimity!"

He lifted his head and honest tears showed behind his spectacles.

"And now, brother,"—in a brusk, business-like manner, "you, too, will be interested in this article which I was about to demonstrate to the congregation."

He replaced his hat with a dead *punk*, held the pen aloft in gesture, drew a pad of paper from one of his sagging pockets and continued:

"Made of India rubber, combined in a secret process with Belgian talc and Swedish, water-proof shellac, this pen will withstand the acid action of the strongest inks. It is self-filling, durable, compact, artistic in design. The clip prevents its falling from the pocket and consequent loss.

"The point is of the finest, specially selected California, eighteen carat gold. It was designed by that peerless in-

ventor, Thomas Edison. Its every feature, from the safety shank to the velvet tip, is covered by patents granted by the authority of this great republic!

"It does not leak!"—shaking it vigorously. "It does not fail to flow. It does not scratch or prick. Follow me closely, men; watch every move."

With facility he guided the point across the paper in great flourishes, sketching a crudely designed bird on the wing.

"See? See what can be done with this invention? How can any mature man or woman do without this article? *Such* an article!

"This, men, is a three dollar commodity, but for the purposes of advertising I am permitted by the firm to charge you—Two-fifty? No! Two dollars? *No!* One fifty? NO! For the sum of one dollar, American money, E Pluribus Unum and In God We Trust, I will place this invaluable article in your possession. One dollar, men! *One dollar!*

"But wait. Further"—diving into another pocket, "we will give away absolutely free of charge to every purchaser one of these celebrated key rings and chains, made of a new conglomerate called white metal, guaranteed not to rust, tarnish or break except under excessive strain. Keeps your keys safe and always handy. Free, with each and every individual purchase!

"Still more!"—making another dive into the inexhaustable pockets—"Another article used by every gentleman and lady. A hand mirror, a magnifying hand mirror. Carry it in your pocket, have it always handy for the thousand and one uses to which it may be put.

"Think! This magnificent fountain pen, this key-ring and chain, this pocket mirror, a collection which regularly would retail for from four to five dollars, are yours for one dollar. . . .

"Now, who's first?"

Two-Bits who had watched and listened with a growing amazement, mouth open, Adam's apple jumping, was roused.

"I am, Mister Beal," he said eagerly, digging in a pocket for the money.

"Ah, brother, part of being a Beal is knowing a bargain! Who else, now?"

He sold six of the pens before the big bell at the ranch house summoned the men to supper; then slipped his stock back in the pockets of that clerical looking garment and, grasping Two-Bits by the arm, beaming up into his face, stumped along by his side.

At the table he ate and talked, at one and the same time, doing both with astonishing ease. No matter how great the excess of food in his mouth, he was still able to articulate, and no matter how rapidly he talked, he could always thrust more nourishment between his lips.

"Oh, it warms the heart of a seeker after strays from the herds of the Master to look upon the bright, honest faces of stalwart men!" he cried, brandishing his fork and helping himself to more syrup with the other hand.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, it is written, and I know that when in the presence of such men as you, I am among the blessed of the Father! I can see integrity, devotion to duty, uprightness and honor in all your faces. Or, that is, in *most* of your faces. What contrast!"—heedless of the uproar his qualification of a broad statement caused. "What contrast to the iniquitous ways of those who dwell in the tents of the wicked.

"Why, brethren, only last night I stood in the hotel in yonder settlement and watched and listened to the cries of a lost soul, a young man sunk hopelessly in sin. He was a stranger in a strange land, but he had not yet felt the heavy hand of a slowly-roused God, had not yet become the Prodigal. He had tasted of the wine when it was red and out of his mouth flowed much evil.

"A man possessed of a devil, I am sure, and I spoke to him, asking if he did not desire to seek redemption in the straight and narrow way which leads to the only righteous life.

“‘Righteousness, hell!’ he shouted at me, his face black with ungodly thoughts.

“‘That’s what I want *less* of: righteousness! That’s what’s raised hell in me!’

“Oh, it was terrible, brothers! He drank continually and finally they carried him off to bed, cursing and swearing, cherishing bitterness in his heart, which is against the word of the Almighty. A definite wrong was in his mind, I was led to presume, for he cried again and again: ‘I’ll break her if it’s the last thing I do! I’ll ruin her and bring her back!’

“I tell you, my fellow men, I prayed fervently for that lost soul through the night. Something heavy is upon him, something tremendous.”

“Likely some of that high-pressure booze,” remarked one, at which everybody except the Reverend and Two-Bits laughed.

“Goin’ to stay long?” Oliver asked.

“Alas, I am not my own master. My feet are guided from up Yonder. To tarry with my dear brother is my most devout prayer and wish, but we have no promise of the morrow. I may remain in your midst a day, a month. I cannot tell when the call will come.”

Tom Beck had watched with a glimmer in his eye until the newcomer told of the scene in the hotel. It was not difficult for him to identify the sin beset young man as Hilton and at that he became less attentive to the garrulous talk of the itinerant preacher-peddler. In fact, he gave no heed at all until, returned to the bunk house, the Reverend made a point of seeking out Dad Hepburn and talking to him in confidence.

Dad’s bed was directly across from Tom’s and he could not help hearing.

“I waited to get you alone,” Beal said, dropping his elocutionary manner, “because what other’s don’t know won’t hurt ’em, and so forth. But just before I was leav-

ing town, saddling my mare in the corral, I heard two men talking and it may interest you.

"This outfit uses the H C on horses as well as cattle, don't it?"

"That's right."

"Exactly! One of the men said (they didn't know I was near, understand). 'So there's eight more H C horses gone west.' And the other one said, 'Yes, they was camped at the mouth of Twenty Mile this mornin'. It's easy. They had the horses in a box gulch, with a tree down across the mouth, most natural.'

"Have you sold any horses lately?"

Hepburn glanced about cautiously and just before he turned to reply his eyes met Beck's gaze, cold and hard this time, flinging an unmistakable challenge at him.

"Not a horse," he mumbled. "They're sneaking out of the country with 'em. Tom, come here,"—with a jerk of his head. Beck walked over and sat down. "Did you hear what the Reverend says?" Dad asked. "About the horses?"

"Yes, I ain't surprised. Are you?"

His eyes, again amused, bored into Hepburn's face with the query:

"No, but —"

The sharp batter of running hoofs cut him short. The whole assemblage was listening. The rider stopped short at the gate, they heard it creak and a moment later he came across toward the bunk house at a high lope. They heard him speak gruffly to the horse, heard the creak of leather as he swung down and then jingling spurs marked his further progress toward the door.

It was Henry Riley, owner of the Bar Z ranch, thirty miles down Coyote creek. A cattleman of the old order, a man not given to haste or excitement. His appearance caught the interest of all, for he was breathing fast and his eyes blazed.

"Where's Dad?" he asked and Hepburn, rising, said: "Here. What's the matter, Henry?"

"Who's this nester in Devil's Hole?" Riley asked.

"Why . . . I didn't know there was a nester there."

Dad answered hesitatingly and Beck scraped one foot on the floor.

"Well, there is. Guess we've all been asleep. He's there, with a girl, and they filed on that water yesterday. That shuts your outfit and mine out of the best range in the country if he fences, which he will! If they're goin' to dry farm our steers off the range we'd better look alive."

"I'll be damned," muttered Hepburn. "That was one of the next things I was goin' to have her do, file on that water."

He scratched his head and turned. Beck was waiting for him to face about.

"Now," he said slowly, "what are you going to do?"

His eyes flashed angrily and any who watched could see the challenge.

Silently Hepburn reached for his belt and gun, strapped it on, dug in his blankets for another revolver and shoved it into his shirt.

"First," he said, "I'm goin' after those horses. *That* ain't too late to be remedied. No, I'll go alone!" as Tom stepped toward his bunk where his gun hung.

Hepburn gave Beck stare for stare as though defying him now to impute his motives and strode out into a fine rain, drawing on his slicker.

CHAPTER IX

THE DESTROYER

WHILE the men were eating that night another rider had come to H C. He entered slowly, tied his horse to the fence and walked down along the cottonwoods toward the house. He stood outside a time, looking through the window at Jane whose golden head was bowed in the mellow glow of the student lamp as she worked at her desk.

He stepped lightly across the veranda and rapped; at her bidding he entered.

"Dick!" she exclaimed.

"Undoubtedly," he said, with forced attempt at lightness.

"How did you get here? Why come at this time of day?"—rising and walking toward him.

"I rode a horse, and I came because I couldn't stay away from you any longer."

She looked at him, head tilted a bit to one side, and genuine regret was in her slow smile.

"Oh, Dick, don't look or feel like that! I'm glad to see you, but I *wish* you'd stop thinking and talking and looking like that. I don't like to have you so dreadfully determined . . . when it's no use.

"All this way to see me! And did you eat? Of course you didn't!"

"I don't want anything," he protested glumly.

"But you must."

She seized on his need as welcome distraction from the love making, which undoubtedly was his purpose. She took his coat and hat, placed cigarettes for him and went to the kitchen to help Carlotta prepare a quick meal. She

served it herself, going to pains to make it attractive, and finally seated herself across the table from Hilton, who made a pretense of eating.

She talked, a bit feverishly, perhaps, but compelled him to stick to matters far from personal and after he had finished his scant meal and lighted a cigarette he leaned back in his chair and smiled easily at her. It was a good smile, open and frank and gentle, but when it died that nasty light came back; as though the smile showed the man Jane Hunter had tolerated for long, masking the man she now tried to put from her.

"If your enthusiasm were for anything else, I'd like it," he said.

"But it isn't. Why can't you like it as it is?"

He ignored the question.

"Busy, Jane?"

"As the devil on Forty-Second street."

"And still think it's worth while?"

"The only worth-while thing I've ever done; more worth while every day. So much worth while that I'm made over from the heart out and I've been here less than a month!"

"After taking a bottle of your bitters I am now able to support my husband and children," he quoted ironically.

"Laugh if you must,"—with a lift of her shoulders. "I mean it."

"You get along with the men, Jane?"

"Very well so far. They're fine, real, honest men. I like them all. There are some things I don't quite understand yet," examining a finger nail closely. "I haven't made up my mind that my foreman can be trusted or that he's as honest as he seems to be."

"The fellow who was with you yesterday?"

"No; Dad Hepburn. An older man. He . . . He seems to evade me some times."

Hilton watched her closely. She was one of the few women he knew who had been able to judge men; he made a mental note of the name she had mentioned.

The talk became desultory and Dick's eyes clung more closely to Jane's face, their hard, bright light accentuated. It began to rain and Jane, hearing, looked out.

"Raining! You can't go back tonight. You'll have to stay here. Mr. Hepburn can fix you up with the rest of the men."

He smiled peculiarly at that, for it cut. He made no comment beyond expressing the belief that a wetting, since it was not cold, would do no harm. She knew that he did not mean that and contrasted his evasion with Beck's quiet candor.

"What's the idea of the locket?" he asked and Jane looked down at the trinket with which she had been toying. "You never were much addicted to ornaments."

She laughed with an expression which he did not understand.

"Something is in there which is very dear to me," she said. "I don't wear it as an ornament; as a talisman, rather. I'm getting to be quite dependent on it." Her manner was outwardly light but at bottom was a seriousness which she did not wholly cover.

"Excuse me . . . for intruding on privacies," he said bitterly. Then, after a moment: "The picture of some cow-puncher lover, perhaps?"

"No, though that wouldn't be unreasonable," she replied. "Such things have happened in—"

"Let's cut this!" he said savagely, breaking in on her and sitting forward. "Let's quit these absurd banalities."

"You know why I came here. You know what's in my mind. There's a job before me that gets bigger every day; the least you can do is to help me."

"In what?"

"Tell me what I must do to make you understand that I love you."

He leaned across the table intently. The girl laughed.

"Prove to me first that two and two make six!"

"Meaning?"

"That it can't be done."

"It's the first time you've ever been that certain."

"The first time I've ever expressed the certainty, perhaps. Things happen, Dick. I progress."

"Do you mean such an impossible thing as that there is someone else?"

"Another question which you have no right to ask."

"Jane, look at me! Are you wholly insane?"

"No, but as I look back I think I have been a little off, perhaps."

"But you're putting behind you everything that is of you,"—his color rising with his voice as her secure conviction maddened him. "The life that is yours by nature and training. You're going blindly ahead into something you don't know, among people who are not yours!"

He became suddenly tense, as though the passion which he had repressed until that moment swept through him with a mighty urge. His breath slipped out in a long sigh.

"You are repeatedly mistaken, Dick. I have just found my people."

"*Your* people!" he scoffed.

She nodded.

"'East is East and West is West,' you know, and the two shall never meet. It must be true, and, if so, I have never been of the east. I never felt comfortable there, with the lies and the shams and the hypocrisies that were all about us. Out here, I do.

"Perhaps that is why you and I . . ." She shrugged her shoulders again. "You see, Dick, I have cast my lot here. The East is gone, for me; it never can pass for you. I have found my people; they are my people, their Gods are my Gods. I have a strength, a peace of mind, self respect, ambitions and natural, real impulses that I never knew before. I feel that I have come home!"

He laughed dryly, but she went on as though she had not heard:

"You have never understood me; you never can hope

to now. There's a gulf between us, Dick, that will never be bridged. I am sorry, in a way. I never can love you and I hate to see you wasting your desires on me.

"I have thought about you a great deal lately. You are missing all that is fine in life and because of that I am sorry for you. We used to have one thing in common: the lack of worthy ideals. I have wiped out that lack and I wish you might; I truly wish that, Dick! And it seems possible to me that you may, just because you are here where realities count. There's an incentive in the atmosphere and I do hope it gets into your blood.

"It is all so nonsensical, the thing you are doing, so foolish. I suppose I am the only thing you have ever wanted that you couldn't get and that's what stimulates your want. It's not love, Dick."

"How do you know?"

"I have learned things in these weeks," with a wistful smile. "I have learned about . . . men, for one thing. I have found an honesty, an honor, a simple directness, which I have never known before."

He rose and leaned his fists on the table.

"You mean you've found a lover?"

She met his eyes frankly.

"Again I say, you have no right to ask that question. In the second place, I am not yet sure."

His mouth drew down in a leer.

"So that's it, eh? So you would turn me away for some rough-neck who murders the English language and smells of horse. You'd let a thing like that overwhelm you in a few days when a civilized human has failed after years of trying!

"I've tried to treat you with respect. I've tried to be gentle and honorable. Now if you don't want that, if you want this he-man sort of wooing, by God you'll get it!"

He kicked his chair back angrily and advanced about the table. A big blue vein which ran down over his forehead stood out in knots. Jane rose.

"Dick!" she cried and in the one word was disappointment, anger, appeal, reproach, query.

"Oh, I'm through," he muttered. "I used to think you were a different sort; used to think you were fine and finished. But if you're a woman in the raw . . . then I'll treat you as such. You've got me, either way; I can't get you out of my mind an hour.

"I'm through holding myself back, now. You've driven me mad and you prove by your own insinuations that the lover you want is not the one who will dally with you. You want the primitive, go-and-get-it kind, the kind that takes and keeps. Well, mine can be that kind!"

She backed from him slowly and he kept on advancing with a menacing assurance, his face contorted with jealousy and desire.

"The other day,"—stopping a moment, "when I took your hands and felt your body here in this room I was almost beside myself. You haven't been out of my thoughts an hour since then! I tried to kill it with reason and then with drink. I've tried to be patient and wait among the . . . the cattle in that little town." He walked on toward her.

"Dick, are you mad?" she challenged, trying to summon her assurance through the fright which he had given her.

"It's not what you think. . . . It's none of your affair—

"Dick!"

He grasped her wrists roughly.

"Am I mad?" he repeated, looking down at her, his jaw clenched. "Yes, I'm mad. Mad from want of you . . . your eyes, your lips, your hair, your very breath drives me mad and when I hear you tell me that you've found the flesh that calls to your flesh among these men it drives me wild! I can offer you more than any of them can a thousand times over. . . .

"Great God, I love you!"

But his snarl was not the snarl of devotion, of affection. It was the lust cry of the destroyer, he who would possess

hungrily, unthinkingly, without sympathy or understanding . . . even without respect.

He drew her to him roughly and she struggled, too frightened to cry out, face white and lips closed. He imprisoned both her hands in his one and with the other arm about her body crushed it against his, her breast to his breast, her limbs to his limbs. He lowered his lips toward her face and she bent backward, crying out lowly, but the touch of her lithe torso, tense in the struggle to be free, made his strength greater, swept away the last barrier of caution and his body was aflame with desire.

"Dick . . . stop. . . ." she panted and managed to free one hand.

She struck him on the mouth and struck again, blindly. He gave her efforts no notice but, releasing her hands, crushed her to him with both arms and she could feel the quick come and go of his breath through her hair as he buried his face in it.

And at that she became possessed of fresh strength. She turned and half slipped, half fought her way through his clutch, running down the room to the fireplace where she stood with the davenport between them breathing irregularly, a hand clenched at her breast.

"You . . . you beast!" she said, slowly, unsteadily as he came toward her again.

"Yes, beast!" he echoed. "We're all beasts, every one of us who sees and feels and I've seen you and I've felt you and the beast is hungry!"

"And you call that love!" She spoke rapidly, breathlessly. "An hour ago if anyone would have said that Dick Hilton, sober, would have displayed this, this *thing* which is his true self, I'd have come to your defense! But now . . . you . . . you!"

Her face was flaming, her voice shook with outraged pride.

"Stop!" she cried, drawing herself up, no longer afraid. She emerged from fear commanding, impressive, and Hil-

ton hesitated, putting one hand to a chair back and eyeing her calculatingly as though scheming. The vein on his forehead still stood out like an uneven seam.

"For shame!" she cried again. "Shame on you, Dick Hilton, and shame on me for having tolerated, for having believed in you . . . little as I did! Oh, I loathe it all, you and myself — that was — because if it had not been for that other self which tolerated you, which gave you the opening, this . . . this insult would never have been. You, who failing to buy a woman's love, would take it by strength! You would do this, and talk of your desire as love. You, who scoff at men whose respect for women is as real as the lives they lead. You . . . you beast!"

She hissed the word.

"Yes, beast!" he repeated again. "Like all these other beasts, these others who are blinding you as you say I have blinded you, who have —"

"Stop it!" she demanded again. "There is nothing more to be said . . . ever. We understand one another now and there is but one thing left for you to do."

"And that?"

"Go."

He laughed bitterly and ran a hand over his sleek hair.

"If I go, you go with me," he said evenly.

"Leave this house," the girl commanded, but instead of obeying he moved toward her again menacingly, a disgusting smile on his lips.

He passed the end of the davenport and she, in turn, retreated to the far side.

"When I go, two of —"

"I take it that you heard what was said to you, sir."

At the sound of the intruding voice Hilton wheeled sharply. He faced Tom Beck, who stood in the doorway, framed against the black night, arms limp and rather awkwardly hanging at his sides, eyes dangerously luminous; still, playing across them was that half amused look, as though this were not in reality so serious a matter.

For an interval there was no sound except Hilton's breathing: a sort of hoarse gasp. The two men eyed each other and Jane, supporting her suddenly weakened limbs by a hand on the table, looked from one to the other.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Dick asked heavily.

"Just standin' quiet, waiting to open the gate for you when you ride out."

The Easterner braced his shoulders backward and sniffed.

"And if I don't choose to ride out? What will you do then?"

Beck looked at Jane slowly and his eyes danced.

"It ain't necessary to talk about things that won't happen. You're going to go."

"Who the hell are you to be so certain?"

"My name's Beck, sir. I'm just workin' here."

"And playing the role of a protector?"

"Well, nothing much ever comes up that I don't *try* to do."

Hilton made as if to speak again but checked himself, walked down the room in long strides, seized his coat, thrust his arms into the sleeves viciously and stood buttoning the garment. Beck looked away into the night as though nothing within interested him and Jane stood clutching the locket at her throat, caressing it with her slim, nervous fingers.

"Under the circumstances, making my farewells must be to the point," Hilton said. He spoke sharply, belligerently. "I have just this to say: I am not through."

"Oh, go!" moaned Jane, dropping into a chair and covering her face with her hands.

She heard the men leave the veranda, heard a gruff, low word from Hilton and knew that he went on alone. After the outer gate had closed she heard Tom walk slowly up the path toward the bunk house. He had left her without comment, without any attempt at an expression of concern or sympathy. She knew it was no oversight, but only a delicacy which would not have been shown by many men.

Her loathing was gone, her anger dead; the near past was

a numb memory and she looked up and about the room as though it were a strange place. There, within those walls, she had experienced the rebirth, she had felt ambition to stand alone come into full being, she had shaken off the fetters with which the past had sought to hamper her. . . .

And now she was free, wholly free. The tentacle that had been reached out to draw her back had been cast away. Tonight's renunciation had burned the last bridge to that which had been; Dick Hilton, she believed, would never again be an active influence in her life.

She could not — perhaps fortunately — foretell how mistaken this belief actually would prove to be. She did not know the intensity of a man's jealousy, particularly when Fate has tricked him of his most valued prize. Nor could she foresee those events which would impell her to send for Hilton, to call him back, and the wells of misery which that action would tap!

To-night he was gone, and she was even strong enough to rise above loathing and pity him for the failure he was. Just one fact of him remained. Again she heard his ominous prediction, pronounced on his first visit there: You cannot stand alone! You will fail! You will come back to me!

She knew, now, that she would never return to him, but there were other possibilities as disastrous. Could she meet this new life and beat it and make in it a place for herself? Was her faith in herself strong enough to outride the defeat which very possibly confronted her?

She did not know. . . .

Outside the rain drummed and the cottonwoods, now in full leaf, sighed as the wind bowed their water weighted branches. She went to the window and looked out, searching the darkness for movement. There was none but he was not far away she knew. . . .

Her fingers again sought the locket and she lifted it quickly, holding it pressed tightly against her mouth.

"It's all there, locked up in a little gold disc!"

CHAPTER X

A MATTER OF DIRECTION

IF Dick Hilton had not been bewildered by passion, jealousy and rage at thwarted desires, he might have known that his horse was not taking the homeward way, and had the horse not been bred and raised by one of Colonel Hunter's mares he might have carried his rider straight back to Ute Crossing.

But he was a canny little beast, he was cold and drenched, the trip to town was long and the range on which he had spent his happy colthood was not far off. Horses know riders before riders know horses so, as he went through the gate, he slyly tried out this rider and instead of swinging to the right he bore to the left. He went tentatively through the pitch darkness, one ear cocked backward at first but when Hilton, collar up, hat down, bowed before the storm, gave no evidence of detecting this plan, the beast picked up his rapid walk and took the trail for the nearer, more satisfactory place where many times in the past he had stood out such downpours with no great discomfort under the shelter of a spreading cedar.

And direction was the last thing in Dick Hilton's mind. For a long interval his thoughts were incoherent and the conflicting emotions they provoked were distressing. Being alone, made physically uncomfortable by the water seeping through his shoulders and breeches, sensing the steady movement of the animal under him, brought some order to his mental chaos and finally realization began to dawn.

Yes, he had followed his strongest impulses; there could be no question about what he had done, but as for its wisdom: Ah, that was another matter, and he cursed himself

for a fool, at first mentally, then under his breath and when the horse began mounting a steep incline, clattering over rocks with his unshod hoofs, Hilton halted him and looked about in foolish attempt to make out his whereabouts and said aloud:

"Off the road. That's twice you've made an ass of yourself tonight!"

There was nothing for him to do but go on and trust to the horse. He knew that this was not the highway but consoled himself that it might be a short cut to the Crossing. Small consolation and it was dissipated when they commenced a lurching descent with a wall of rock uncomfortably close to his right, so close that at times his knee scrubbed it smartly. He became alarmed for the horse went cautiously, head low, feeling his way over insecure footing. Once his fore feet slipped and he stopped short while loosened stones rolled before them on the trail and Hilton heard one strike far below to his left, and strike again and again, sounds growing fainter. He peered down into the gloom but could see nothing, hear nothing but the hiss of rain. An empty ache came into his viscera as he imagined the depths that might wait to that side.

After a moment the horse went on, picking his way gingerly.

Somewhere beyond or below he made out a light. It was a feeble glow and its location became a weird thing for lack of perceptive, but it cheered him. He was decidedly uncomfortable and his state of mind added to the physical need of warmth and shelter so he urged the horse on.

Finally they reached a flat and he felt wet brush slapping at his legs as the horse, intent on the light himself, trotted forward.

Their destination was a cabin. The glow finally resolved itself into cracks of light showing between logs and through a tarpaulin which hung across the doorway.

Dick shouted. Movement inside; the curtain was drawn back and he rode blinking into the light, which he could see

came from a fireplace. A woman stood outlined against the flare.

"Who's there?" she asked sharply, and Dick stopped his horse.

"My name is Hilton," he said, "but that won't do you much good. I'm a stranger and I'm off my way, I guess."

The other did not reply as he dismounted and walked toward her.

"Without a slicker," she said. "Come in."

The first thing he saw inside was movement: A cartridge belt, swinging from a nail. A rifle leaned handily against the door casing.

The girl who had held the curtain back for him to enter let it drop and turned to face him. Hilton drew his breath sharply. Blue-black hair, in a heavy, orderly mass atop a shapely, high-held head and falling down her straight trim back in one thick plait; brown eyes, ripe red lips, a delicate chin and a throat of exquisite proportions. His gaze traveled down her figure, the natural grace of which could not be concealed by the shirt and riding skirt she wore. She was wholly beautiful.

"Oh, I've seen you before," he said slowly. "You're the girl that demanded respect and got it in the Crossing the other day!"

She eyed him in silence a moment, evidently unaware of the admiration in his tone.

"I never saw you. I ain't been here long," she said, her expression still defiant, as though he had challenged her. She searched his face, his clothing, and back at his face again. "Where was you travelin' tonight?"

"I was going to the Crossing," he said with a short laugh. "My horse brought me here."

Without comment she walked to the fire and threw on another knot. He watched her movements, the free rhythmic swing of her walk, the easy grace with which her hands and arms moved, the perfect assurance in even her smallest gesture. His eyes kindled.

"Set," she said, indicating a box by the hearth. "You're soaked. Lucky you struck here or you'd made a night of it."

Hilton seated himself, holding his hands toward the fire. He looked about the one room of the cabin. In two corners were beds on the earthen floor, a table made from a packing box contained dishes, Dutch ovens and a frying pan were on the hearth. The roof leaked.

The girl sat eyeing the fire, rather sullenly. He held his gaze on her, watching the play of light over her throat as it threw a velvety sheen on the wind kissed skin. Her shirt was open at the neck and he could see the easy rise and fall of her breast as she breathed. He noticed that her fingers were slender and that her wrists, bronzed by exposure, indicated with all their delicacy, wiry strength. Another thing: She was clean.

Suddenly the girl looked up.

"Think you'd know me again?" she said brusily, and rather swaggered as she moved.

"I don't think I shall ever forget you," he replied. "I knew I should not the first time I saw you. I shall never forget the way you gave that fellow what he deserved. It was great!"

His manner was kindly, showing no resentment at her belligerence and though her only reply was a sniff he knew that what he had said pleased her.

"I wouldn't want you to think I'm staring at you," he went on. "A man shouldn't be blamed for looking at you closely."

"How's that?"

"You are very beautiful."

She poked at the fire with a stick.

"I reckon that'll be enough of that," she said as she walked back toward the door.

The man smiled and followed her with his eyes, which squinted speculatively.

"You'd better unsaddle that horse," she said. "He'll roll with your kak if you don't."

Hilton looked about the room again.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

She whirled and looked at him with temper. Her hand, perhaps unconsciously, was pressed against the wall near that rifle.

"What if I am?"—sharply.

"Because if you are I shall not unsaddle my horse. I'll have to go on."

When she put her question she had been rigidly expectant but at his answer she relaxed and the fierceness that had been about her yielded to a curiosity.

"Go on in the rain? How's that?"—in a voice that was quite different, as though she had encountered something she did not understand.

He looked at her a lengthy interval before replying.

"Because I respect you very much. Do you understand that?"

She moved back to the fireplace, eyeing him questioningly, and he met that look with an easy smile.

"No, I don't understand that," she said.

"You should. I saw you beat a man the other day because he didn't respect you. No one but that type of man would refuse to respect you. It's wise, perhaps, for you to take down that rifle when strangers come at night . . . but it isn't always necessary. Some men might stay here with you alone, but I couldn't."

"You mean, that you'd ride on in the rain?"

"Surely."

"Well. . . . You ain't afraid of the gun, are you?"

He laughed outright.

"No, it's not that! It's because I'd ride any distance rather than do something that might bring you unhappiness. Don't you see?" He leaned forward, elbows on knees, looking up into her serious face. "Don't you see that if I

stayed here with you, alone, and people heard about it, they might not respect you?"

"It's none of their business!"

"Neither was it any business of that man to insult you in town the other day. But he did."

"But it's rainin' and you're cold. I ain't afraid of you."

It was raining, but he was not cold. The fire was close and, besides, another warmth was seeping through his body as he looked earnestly into the face of that daughter of the mountains. The ready defiance was gone from it and the features, in repose, gave it an expression that was little less than wistful.

"And you are a young girl who deserves the admiration of every man that walks. If I stayed here with you, you would know it's all right, and so would I. . . . Others might not understand."

She sat down abruptly, leaned back, clasped one knee with her hands and smiled for the first time. It was a beautiful smile, in great contrast to her earlier sullen defiance.

"I like you," she said simply, and Hilton's face grew hot.

"If you like me, my night's ride hasn't gone to waste," he replied, and laughed.

She looked him over again, calculatingly, as closely as she had at first, but with a different interest. Her smile faded but the lips remained slightly parted, showing teeth of calcium whiteness.

"You're the first man that's ever talked that-a way to me. I've been travelin' ever since I can remember, first one place, then another. I've always had to look out for men. . . . I've been able to, too, since I got big enough to be bothered.

"This is the first time any man's talked like you're talkin' to me."

"Bless you," he said very gently, "that's been tough luck. A girl like you are doesn't deserve that."

"Don't she? Well, it ain't what you deserve that counts, it's what you get."

"What's your name?"

"Bobby. . . Bobby Cole."

"How old are you?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know . . . just. About twenty. Alf knows; I ain't thought to ask him for quite a while."

"Who's Alf?"

"My father."

". . . And your mother?"

"I never had none that I recall. She died early; that was back in Oklahoma, Alf says."

"No brothers or sisters?"

A shake of the head.

"And since then you've been alone with your father?"

She nodded. "For weeks an' months, without talkin' to another soul."

"Have you always lived so far away as that? Always in such remote places that you didn't even see people?"

"Huh! Usually I've seen 'em, 'most every day. . . . But there's a difference between seein' folks and talkin' to 'em."

He was puzzled and said so.

"Funny!" she repeated after him. "Maybe it's funny . . . but I can't see it that-a way."

"But surely you've made friends! A girl like you couldn't help make friends."

"I've never had a friend in my life . . . but Alf," she answered bitterly.

"Then it must have been because you didn't want to make friends with people."

"Didn't want to!" she echoed almost angrily. "What else does anybody want but friends . . . an' things like that? Oh, I wanted to all right, but folks don't make friends with . . . with trash like we are. We ain't got enough to have friends; ain't got enough even to have peace."

Hilton studied her face carefully. It was a queer blending of appealing want and virulence.

"They won't even let you have peace?" he asked deliberately to urge her in further revelation.

"Folks that have things don't want other folks to have 'em. In this country when poor folks try to get ahead all they get is trouble."

"Is that always so?"

She shrugged and said, "It's always been so with us. Big cattle outfits have drove us out time after time. They're always sayin' Alf steals; they're always makin' us trouble. I hate 'em!

"I could get along all right. I can fight but Alf can't. He's had so much bad luck that it's took th' heart out of him. . . . If it wasn't for me he couldn't get along at all. He's discouraged."

"You must think a lot of your father."

She shook her head as if to infer that measuring such devotion was an impossibility.

"Think a lot of him? God, yes! He's all I got. He's all I ever had. He's the only one that hasn't chased me out . . . or chased after me. We've been on the move ever since I can recollect, stayin' a few months or a year or two, then hittin' the trail again. Move, move, move! Always chased out by big outfits, always made fun of, an' he's been good to me through it all. I'd crawl through fire for Alf."

"A devotion like that is a very fine and noble thing."

"Is it? It comes sort of natural to me. I never thought about it,"—with a weary sigh.

"How did you happen to come here?" he asked.

She looked at him and a flicker as of suspicion crossed her face.

"Just come," she replied, rather evasively, he thought.

For a time they did not speak. The fire crackled dully. Steam rose in wisps from Hilton's soaked clothing and a cunning crept into his expression. The rain pattered on the

roof and dripped through in several places, forming dark spots on the hard floor; the horse stamped in the mud outside.

The man saw the regular leap of the pulse in her throat and caressed his thumb with finger tips as delicately as though they stroked that smooth skin.

Her lips were parted . . . and *such* lips! He told himself that she was more beautiful than he had first thought and as filled with contrasts as the heavens themselves. Shortly before she had been defiant, ready for trouble, prepared to defend herself with a rifle if necessary; now she was a child; that, and no more . . . and she was distinctive . . . quite so.

"You better stay," she said rather shyly after a time. "Alf'll be back some time before mornin'. Nobody'll know."

He shook his head.

"You and I would know, and after I've told you what I think about it, maybe you wouldn't like me if I did stay . . . you've said you did like me."

He rose, smiling.

"Sure enough goin'?"

"Sure enough going."

"But you're soaked and cold."

"No man could do less for a girl like you."

He bowed playfully low and when he lifted his eyes to her again they read her simple pleasure. He had touched her greatest love, the desire to be treated by men with respect.

"I'll just ask you to show me the way."

"You come by the way, I guess. Just start back that trail and your cayuse'll take you to the road—

"But Alf'll be back. We've never turned anybody out in the rain before."

"Then this is something new. Don't ask me again, please. When you ask a man it makes it very hard to refuse and I must . . . for your sake.

"After I strike the road, then what?"

"Follow right past the H C ranch to town. You know where that is?"

A wave of rage swept through him.

"I ought to!" he said bitterly. "I was sent away from there tonight."

"Sent away? In the *rain*?"

"In the rain."

"Why did they do that?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Because there are things which some people do not value as highly as you do. Generosity, thoughtfulness for the desires of others, hospitality."

He licked his lips almost greedily as he watched her.

"Did *she* know?"

"Who do you mean?"

"That greenhorn gal."

"Yes, she knew," he answered grimly, and buttoned his coat.

He put out his hand and she took it, rather awed.

"Some time I may come back and thank you for what you've wanted to do."

"Oh, you'll come back?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes,"—eagerly.

"Then it is impossible for me to stay away for long!"

She stood watching, as, touching his hat, he rode into the night. She let the curtain drop and returned to the fire, standing there a moment. Then she sat down, rather weakly, and stretched her slim legs across the hearth.

"I'll be damned!" she said, rather reverently.

Hilton did not ride far. His horse was reluctant to go at first and then stopped and stood with head in the air, nickering softly and would not go on when his rider spurred him. After a moment Hilton sat still and listened. He heard the steady *plunk-plunk-plunk* of a trotting horse and, soon, the swish of brush; then a call, rather low and cautious.

The canvas before the doorway was drawn back.

"You decided to stay?" Then, in surprise, "Who's there?"—sharply.

One word in answer and Hilton remembered it:

"Hepburn."

The rider dismounted and entered.

Dick rode on up the trail. When he reached Ute Crossing his clothing was dried by the early sun. He ate breakfast and crawled into his bed, angered one moment, puzzled the next and, finally, thrilled as he dropped asleep with a vision of firelight playing over a deliciously slender throat.

CHAPTER XI

HEPBURN'S PLAY

IT was the next morning. Beck, standing beside Jane's desk, had told her of the foreman's departure and its motive.

"But doesn't that mean he'll be in danger?" she queried in frank dismay.

"A man who goes after horse thieves is likely to run into trouble, ma'am. That is, if he gets close to 'em. He wouldn't let anybody go with him so I guess he figures he's competent,"—dryly. "He'll come back all right. I'd bet on it."

"But I don't want any of you men to put yourselves in danger for me, for the things I own. I won't have it! Haven't we any law to protect us?"

Beck shook his head.

"There's law, on books. But using that law takes time and in some cases, like this, there ain't time to spare. You've got to make a law of your own or those that somebody else makes won't be worth much to you.

"It ain't just pleasant to have to go gunning for your horses and cattle, but if that's the only way to hold 'em it's got to be done. It's either go get 'em and drive the thieves out or be driven out yourself. You don't want to be driven out, do you, ma'am?"

"You know the answer to that," she declared resolutely. "Where is this place? How long will it take him to get there?"

"Can't tell that. Twenty Mile is only a short ride, but we got the news late. They're probably gone yonder by now and he might trail 'em a good many days an' then lose 'em."

Again that dryness of manner as he looked at the girl.

"And this other? This water hole? What about that?"

Beck could not give her an answer.

"It all depends on what sort of nester this is. He might be talked out of it, though that ain't likely."

She tapped the desk with nervous fingers.

"I came down to tell you about Dad last night. That's why I was here," he explained, as though he considered an explanation necessary. And with it was an indication of the curiosity which he could not conceal.

Jane flushed, and her gaze fell. The man stood looking down at her golden hair, the soft skin of cheeks and throat, the parted lips. One of his hands closed slowly, tightly. For a moment he let himself want her!

"I am very glad that you did come. I don't know how much you heard or what you saw but—"

"Nothing that I can recall, except that you wasn't havin' your own way."

The courtesy of this touched her and she smiled her gratitude.

"Dick Hilton had been an old friend of mine; that is, I thought he was a friend. I . . .

"He said some things last night that I wouldn't want you to misunderstand. They. . . . That is, it would hurt me to think that you might believe what you heard him say."

"I don't think there's any danger of me misunderstanding anything that man would say about you. I mean, his meaning, ma'am, not only his words."

"That is as much assurance as could be given," she replied.

For forty-eight hours following Hepburn's departure the H C was in a state of expectation. Frequently, even on the first night following, the men would stop talking and listen at any unusual sound as though that all believed it might be the foreman returning or some one with the word that he would never return, because the remainder of the crew did

not have the faith in his well being that Beck had expressed to Jane Hunter.

The Reverend held the floor much of the time, preaching frequent impromptu sermons, discoursing largely on small matters. To him the rest listened in delight with the exception of Two-Bits, who was overawed by the verbosity of his kin.

A less obvious activity of the Reverend's was his pertinent, never ceasing questioning. He asked questions casually and covered his attempts to glean information by long-winded comments on irrelevant subjects. Tom Beck, even, caught himself expressing opinions when he had not intended to and guarded himself thereafter.

"He's an old fox!" he thought. "He knows a heap more than he lets on . . . like some other folks."

Otherwise the man seemed harmless. He let no opportunity pass to sell his fountain pens which he carried always in the pockets of his frock coat. He took frequent inventories of his stock and when he miscounted or actually found some article missing he turned the place upside down until the loss was adjusted.

He seemed inclined to linger because though assuring the rest that his plans were not of mortal making he often spoke of the summer's work. He was no mean ranch hand himself and was with his brother much, doing everything from branding colts to digging post holes.

When, on the morning of the third day Hepburn had not returned, Jane called Beck to the house and asked if he did not think it wise to send help. The man did not reply at once because at this suggestion a possibility flashed into his mind which he had not considered hitherto. He looked at the girl who stood fingering the locket and asked himself:

"Has he taken this chance to quit the country? Has something happened that is bound to come to light?"

Aloud, he said:

"Your worry is in the wrong place. You're worrying over your men and you ought to be worrying over your

stock. You've come into this country; you want to stay; you don't seem to understand, quite, that this is no polite game you're playing.

"When a man goes to work for an outfit, if he's the right kind to be a top hand out here, he's willing to do anything that comes up, even if it's risking his life. That ain't right pleasant to think about, ma'am, but we all understand it. If it has to be it has to be; no choice.

"If you're going to worry more about your men in a case like this than you do about havin' them hold up your end of the game you ain't going to play up to your part. You can't be soft hearted and stand off horse thieves."

"But, don't you see that I can't feel that way?" she pleaded.

"Then you've got to act that way, ma'am," he replied in rebuke. "Your men have got to understand that you care whether school keeps or not . . . or school ain't going to keep. Get that straight in your head."

He looked down at her a moment and his face changed, that little dancing light coming into his eyes at first; then he smiled openly.

"There's a word we use out here that I guess that they didn't use in the country you come from. It's *Guts*. They're necessary, ma'am."

He waited to see how she would take his assertion, but she only flushed slightly.

"If Hepburn don't show up soon, it might be wise to go prospectin', but it won't be best to think more about him than you do about the men he's after . . . least, it won't be wise to show you do. I ain't advisin' you to be hard hearted. Just play the game; that's all."

He left her, with a deal to think about.

After all, there had been no occasion for concern because at noon, dust covered, on a gaunt horse, the foreman brought eight H C horses into the ranch.

The men hastened from the dinner table but Hepburn did

not respond to their queries and congratulations. He bore himself with dignity and had an eye only for the completion of his task.

"Open the gate to the little corral, Two-Bits," he directed and, this done, urged the horses within.

Next he dragged his saddle from the big bay and rubbed the animal's back solicitously, let him roll and led him to the stable where he measured out a lavish feed of oats.

Meanwhile he had been surrounded by insistent questioners but he put them off rather abruptly; when he emerged from the stable, slapping his palms together to rid them of moist horse hair he stopped, hitched up his chaps and looked from face to face until his eyes met those of Tom Beck, who had been the last to approach. Their gazes clung, Hepburn's in challenge, now, and in the other's an expression which defied definition.

"I brought 'em in," the foreman said, still staring at Beck and bit savagely down on his tobacco. "Does *that* mean anything?"

Beck smiled, as though it did not matter much, and said: "For the present . . . you win."

The others had not caught the significance of this exchange and when Dad moved forward their talk broke out afresh. The foreman grinned, pleased at the stir.

"Now, now! Don't swamp a waddie when he comes in after next to no sleep an' ridin' from hell to breakfast!" he protested. "One at a time, one at a time."

"Tie to the story an' drag her past us," advised Curtis.

"It ain't much,"—with a modesty that was somewhat forced. "It wasn't nothin' but a case of goin' and gettin' the goods. Picked up the trail at the mouth of Twenty Mile early the mornin' after I set out and dragged right along on it. There was three of 'em, so I laid pretty low after noon. Then one cuts off towards the rail road and at night the others turned the horses into that old corral at the Ute's buckskin camp. I waited until they got to sleep,

saw I couldn't sneak the stock away so,"—he spat and wiped his mustache, "I just naturally scattered their fire all ways!"

He laughed heartily.

"You'd ought to seen 'em coming out of their blankets! I dropped two shots in the coals and then blazed away at the first man up. Missed him but cut 'em off from their ridin' horses, got ours out of the corral while their saddle stock was stampedin' all over the brush and lit out for here, hittin' the breeze!"

"That's about all. Stopped at Webb's last night and tried to figure out the men, but they're strangers, I guess."

There were comments and questions. Then Jimmy Oliver, looking at Dad's saddle, said:

"What happened to your horn, there?"

The foreman chuckled.

"One of 'em almost got me, boys, but a miss is as good as four or five days' ride, ain't it? Was circlin' for the horses, shootin' sideways at 'em when one of 'em put some lead in betwixt me and the horn, only quite close to the horn, it seems."

"Well, I'll be darned if you didn't have a close shave, and —"

Just then Jane Hunter rode up on her sorrel and when she saw her foreman she smiled in relief.

"You're back, and safely!" she said as she dismounted.

"With the bacon, ma'am."

"An' they almost got his bacon, Miss Hunter," Oliver said. "Look here!" He indicated the damaged saddle and explained.

"They came that close to shooting you?" she asked Dad. Her voice was even enough but she could not conceal her dismay at his narrow escape.

"Why, Miss Hunter, that ain't nothin'! I was just tellin' the boys that a miss is as good as a long ride. I'm your foreman, they was your horses —"

"Such things have to be," she broke in, making an effort to be decisive and convincing, but her voice was not just steady and Beck, at least, knew how desperately she tried to play up to her part, to smother her impulse to show that she held life dearer than she did her property, to shrink from the hard facts of the hard life she faced.

"So long as I'm your foreman nobody's goin' to get away with your stock without a fight," Hepburn went on pompously, well satisfied with the impression he had made. "If necessary they'll come a lot closer to lettin' blessed sunshine in to my carcass than this! There ain't a man of us who wouldn't do it for you an' gladly. If they're goin' to try to fleece you they've got us to reckon with first.

"Ain't that the truth, Tom?"

Beck did not reply but watched Jane Hunter as she stood looking down at the saddle with its tell tale scar.

The Reverend remained when the group broke up. He leaned low over the saddle and examined the leather binding about the horn. He fingered it, then lowered his face close against it. For a moment he held so and then straightened slowly. He walked toward the bunk house so absorbed that he talked to himself and as he passed Beck he was muttering:

". . . wolf in sheep's clothing . . ."

"What's that?" asked Beck.

The Reverend stopped, surprised that he had been overheard. He looked at Tom and blinked and rattled the pens in his coat pocket; then looked about to see whether they were observed.

"Brother, when a man is honest does he go to great pains to make that honesty evident? Does he lie to make people believe he does not act a lie?"

"Not usually. What are you drivin' at, Reverend?"

The other stepped closer.

"If you'll examine that saddle horn, you'll discover that the shot which tore it was fired from a gun held so close

that the powder burned the leather. More: that it was fired so recently that the smell of powder is still there.

“There is something rotten, brother, in a locality nearer than Denmark!”

Beck whistled softly to himself.

CHAPTER XII

A NEIGHBORLY CALL

THE mountains which had been brown and saffron when Jane Hunter came to take possession of her ranch grew tinted with green as grasses sprouted under the coaxing sun. Piñons were edged with lighter tints, contrasting sharply with the deep color of older growth. Service bushes turned cream color with bloom and sage put out new growth; calves, high-tailed and venturesome, frolicked between frequent meals from swollen udders, birds nested and shy mountain flowers completed their scant cycle.

No life remained arrested and with the rest the girl developed. She took on a more robust color, her eyes which had always been clear and cool, possessed a different look and a thin sprinkling of tiny freckles appeared across her nose. She had taken to the ways of the mountains easily. Her modish clothing was discarded and she wore brightly colored shirts, a brimmed hat, drab riding skirt and the smallest pair of boots that had ever been manufactured in that country.

Two-Bits was wide-eyed in his enthusiasm.

"My gosh, Reverend!" he whispered, "look at them boots! Ain't they th' grandest little things you ever seen? . . . Gosh, they're too little for any spurs she can buy, ain't they? *Gosh . . .*"—in helpless admiration.

Two-Bits and the Reverend had something on. This was evident from the manner in which they kept apart from the others. Each evening they would sit on a wagon seat or perch on a corral or Azariah would stand near while his brother groomed his little horse, Nigger, and they would talk, low and confidently, the Reverend gesticulating and

Two-Bits looking far away and talking laboriously as though he were memorizing something.

The homely fellow took several mysterious trips to town and once he borrowed ten dollars from Beck and offered a buckskin bridle as security, which the other waved away with affectionate curses.

Hepburn had been commissioned to talk with Cole, the nester, and determine his plans as they might affect the H C. This took him away from the ranch repeatedly . . . so many times, in fact, that it gave Beck one more thing to wonder about. Also, there was a letter for Hepburn, arriving a day or two after his return with the stolen horses, which sent him suddenly to Ute Crossing; thereafter he went frequently.

There seemed no way around the potential difficulty which the nester presented and, as one of her last resorts, Jane sent Tom to the Crossing to look up the record of the filing himself and to confer with the one remaining attorney in the town. He announced his going and Two-Bits, hearing, asked him to bring back a package which would be waiting there. When Tom returned that night he handed the gawky lad a small parcel which he immediately stuffed into his shirt and carried to the supper table.

"Them your jooles?" Oliver asked.

"None of your gol-darned business!"

"Ah, come on, old timer, an' let us in on it," the other pleaded. "I'll bet it's a present for your best girl."

"If you got to know, it's corn plasters for th' corns on your brains, Jimmy," Two-Bits countered.

He hurried through his meal and from the table and, with the Reverend, walked down toward the creek where they went through their usual performance, this time, however, with less prompting from the clergyman. Then, brushing the dust from his shirt, adjusting his scarf, Two-Bits walked nervously toward the ranch house.

Jane answered his knock with a call to enter. He stepped in with the package in his hand, but as he removed his hat

the parcel dropped to the floor and when he regained an erect position after recovering it his face was fiery red.

"What's your trouble tonight, Two-Bits?" Jane asked, approaching him.

"In," he began and stopped to clear his throat. He swallowed with great difficulty. "In — In recognition of your — your God —" He coughed and swallowed once more.

"*What?*" — in amazement.

"In recognition of your God — your God given beauty, an' estim — estimable qualifications —"

He ran a finger inside his collar and dropped his hat. Perspiration stood on his lip in beads and his dismayed eyes roved the room. He moved his feet nervously.

"In recognition of your God —" he began again, but broke short:

"Hell, ma'am," he exploded, "my brother taught me a fine speech —

"Here!" — holding the package toward her with an unsteady hand and a great relief coming into his eyes. "I found this in th' road an' thought mebby you might want 'em."

Controlling her desire to laugh at his confusion Jane took the package and turned it over in her hands.

"What is it, Two-Bits? Why do you bring it to me?"

"I can't use it — 'em. I thought . . . I . . ." he began, backing rapidly toward the door, moving with accelerated speed as he put distance between them.

"Two-Bits, you wait!" she commanded. "I'm going to find out what this is before you go."

He looked about in a fresh agony of embarrassment but her order had rendered him unable to move. Jane broke the string, took off the wrapping and opened a paper box. Within reposed a pair of spurs, as small spurs as her boots were small boots. They were beautiful products of some mountain forge, one-piece steel, heavily engraved by hand, silver plated. Small silver chains and hand-tooled straps

were attached and as she held them up the delicate rowels jingled like tiny bells.

"Two-Bits!" she cried. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and made for the door again.

She caught him by the arm that time, else he would have fled, and she made him look at her.

"Two-Bits, you lied to me! You didn't find these on the road, now, did you?"

"Well, that is . . . Not exactly, ma'am,"—weakly.

"Where did they come from?"

"A fella, he made 'em an' give 'em to me an' they was too small for me—"

"Don't you tell me another single lie! *Where* did you get them?"

"Well . . . I had 'em made,"—swallowing again, and *very* weakly.

"Two-Bits!"—seizing his rough, cold hand while a suggestion of tears came into her eyes. "You had these made for me? Why, bless your heart, I've never had a finer gift before. And to think—"

"You're a dear!"

"Oh, my gosh!" he whimpered, and despite her detaining hand, fled the disquieting presence.

Of all men in that country, Two-Bits was the only one who openly accepted Jane Hunter and his devotion was caused by an awed appreciation of her beauty. The others, ever her own riders, remained stolidly skeptical of her ability to measure up to the task she had undertaken and when men talked of the business of the country they unconsciously spoke of the prestige of the H C as a thing of the past.

Hepburn had brought back some of her property that was being driven off but he had not halted attempts to make away with her horses and cattle. There were rumors, vague but persistent, of other depredations and those who best knew the ways of the cattle country awaited that time when the

situation must reach a crisis, when Jane Hunter must be put to the ordeal that would test her mettle.

She was yet unconscious of much of this for her urge to make a place for herself centered on penetrating the callousness of the one man she wanted to impress most of all. He remained aloof, watching her either with that tantalizing amusement or a subtle challenge to win his open friendship. There were moments when, as on that night after their drive to Ute Crossing, she wanted to throw herself on him, to beg, to plead that he lower his reserve and give her a place . . . a place in his heart.

But that, reason told her, would be the last thing to win him. She must trust to the force of her personality to drive her way into his life. . . .

Occasionally he would talk, for she offered a sympathetic audience to the things he had to say but never did their conversation become intimate; the subjects he discussed were invariably abstract and impersonal. While listening she studied the man, striving to define that quality about him which lay behind his reserve and drew her on. She could not seize and analyze it. . . . He was, aside from obvious minor qualities, a closed book.

Still she saw him at night patrolling the cottonwoods before he slept!

She could not know what went on in the heart of that man, of the fight he waged with himself, of the struggle he made to stick to his creed: never to take a chance. He did not know that she was aware of those nightly vigils. The first had been on that night after he had played with her pride and her high spirits. Returned to the bunk house he had suddenly seen her not a smart, capable stranger but as a girl, alone, facing a new life, surrounded by strange people and unfriendly influences. He sensed a pity for her and walked back to look about the place and see that all was well, as he might have watched over a sleeping child.

And then, the day that the sorrel threw her, he had felt

her body and the man in him had been stirred and when next he paced those shadows it was not as a protector of some defenseless life, but as one who quite tenderly lays siege to the heart of a woman.

He did not admit that even to himself. He reasoned that he *was* protecting her because she was a stranger in a strange land and that the impulse was only kindness. But his reason in that was a conscious lie for as he stood under the stars with the cool, quiet night all about him he could hear her voice in the murmur of the creek, hear her limbs rustling her skirts in the soft sigh of wind in the trees, could feel her presence there . . . when he was stark alone. . . .

And he fought it off, fought stubbornly, coldly because he did not know, he did not know love, did not know the ground into which he was being carried.

Women? He had had many but the experiences had been casual, mere surface riffings, and he had never been stirred as this woman stirred him. It was new, entirely new, and Tom Beck feared that which he did not know.

He was accustomed to talk to his horses as men will who love them and while he rode the gulches alone he would in later days reason aloud with his own roan or the H C black or bay he used.

"Why, old stager, we can't take a chance like that!" he said time after time. "We've kept our heels out of trouble by playing a close game, not gettin' out on a limb, but up to now everything that come along has been boy's play . . . compared to this.

"If an *hombre* took a chance with his love that'd be the limit, wouldn't it? He'd have his stack on the table, an' the deal wouldn't be more than started!"

He talked over the loves of other men with those horses, earnestly, soberly. He recalled the marriages he had known between men and women who were from the same stocks, who knew none but the same life; so many were failures! And this girl, this girl of whom he dreamed at night and thought by day, scarcely yet spoke his language!

But he could not argue away the disturbing impulse. He could cover it, hide it from others, hide it from himself at times, but drive it out? Never!

Tom's report to Jane after his trip to town offered no encouragement. The filing had been legally accomplished and its significance was further impressed on the girl when he said:

"It's a mighty popular subject in town, ma'am. Everybody's interested."

"I suppose they all think it will mean trouble for me?"

"Yes, an' they're likely to be right."

She shook her head sharply.

"We don't want trouble, but if it does come we must meet it half way!" She leaned forward determinedly and Beck stirred in his chair. It was a gesture of delight for those were almost his very words to Hepburn when they cleared their relationships of pretense; but he said only:

"That's the easiest way to take trouble on."

Just then Hepburn came in with his report on his visit to the Hole.

"The old fellow seems reasonable, Miss Hunter," he said ponderously. "He don't look like he's a permanent neighbor even if he has bought some cows from Webb, which I found out today. He's poor as a church mouse to begin with—"

"And buyin' more cattle?" put in Beck.

"Oh, they were old stock an' I guess Webb was glad to get rid of 'em," the foreman said with a wave of his hand, yet he did not return Beck's searching gaze.

"Cole told me he didn't have any intention of fencin' up the water so I guess there ain't anything to fret you, Miss Hunter. I sounded him out on buyin' but didn't get far. He's a shiftless old cuss, from th' look of things, so I don't anticipate any trouble at all. He may not even last the summer out."

Tom left and afterward Hepburn talked at length of the

situation, minimizing the menace the others saw, urging Jane to put the matter out of her mind. But the girl was not satisfied and the next day, with Tom, rode off toward the Hole.

They made an early start, riding out of the ranch just as the sun topped the heights to the eastward. Dew hung heavily on the sage from which fresh, clean fragrance rose as their horses stirred the brush. Their shadows were thrown far in advance as they followed a narrow gulch and the sunlight was caught and concentrated and scattered again as the drops flew from leaf and twig.

The girl breathed deeply of the light, sweet air and looked at Beck with a little laugh as of relief.

"When I sit at that desk, I feel like a prosaic business woman whose interest is in ledgers," she said, "but when I ride in this country I feel like a character in some romantic story."

Tom scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"That's too bad, ma'am," he said.

"Which?"

"Both."

"I can see disadvantages to the first, but why the other?"

"I guess I ain't struck much with stories. Used to read 'em, used to get real interested in some but that was before I commenced to get interested in folks."

"Yes?" she encouraged after a moment.

"You see, I think the folks I see and hear and live with and get to know are a lot more interestin' than the folks somebody's thought up out of his head.

"A man in a book talks and acts like a man in a book an' nothing else. You never hear men talk out here in the bunk house or ridin' the country like a writer would make 'em talk on the page of a book; take my word for that. . . .

"Folks are mighty interestin'. The best fun I get is watching folks, studying them. It's a lot more fun than reading about some man or woman you know ain't real, ma'am.

"Life is mighty interesting if you look at it right. If you try to glorify and lie about it you cheapen the whole works. It's either damned serious or a joke. There's no in between. I don't know which it is, yet, but I do know that most of the books I ever read was th' in-between kind, neither one thing nor the other.

"I've been around considerable among men but I never seen things happen in life like writers make things happen in books. Everything works out so lovely in books, folks never make mistakes in anything . . . that is, the heroes don't. Why, love even works out right in books!"

He spoke the last in a lowered voice as if he talked of a sacred thing that had been mistreated. Unconsciously he had voiced the fear that had grown in his own soul and when he turned to look at her his eyes reflected a queer mental conflict, almost fright!

She caught something of his mood and waited a moment to summon the courage to ask very gently:

"And doesn't it . . . doesn't love work out in life?"

He shook his head.

"Seldom, ma'am. In books folks gamble with it like it was . . . why, ma'am, like their love was a white chip!"

Again he spoke as of a sacrilege and his earnestness, though he did not appear to be thinking of her, confused the girl. The wordless interval which followed was distressing to her so she said:

"And the other forms of expression? Music? Poetry? Painting?"

"You've got me on music," he confessed with a laugh. "I've heard greasers playin' fandangoes on busted old guitars that sounded a lot sweeter to me than any band I ever heard.

"As for poetry . . . I don't know,"—shaking his head. "I read some; tried to understand it, but it seems all messed up with words as if poets liked to take the long, painful way of telling things.

"I expect poets want to tell something that's sort of . . .

delicate an' beautiful. . . . Now and then I've got a funny feel out of poetry, but it ain't anything to me like, say, seeing a bunch of little quail run along under the brush, heads up, lookin' back at you, whistlin' to each other. That's the most delicate thing I've ever seen or heard. . . .

"I've seen some paintings, in Los and San Francisco; once in Chicago and once in Denver. I don't know. They don't get my idea of it. I never want to see anything more beautiful than sunrise over the Grand Cañon, or sunsets over these hills, dust storm on the desert, snow blowin' before a norther off the ridges, and things like that. God, who's such a close friend to the Reverend, and who I don't know much about, is as good a painter as any I've ever seen."

He said no more but rode apparently thinking of much more that might be said and Jane watched him carefully, a hungry look coming into her eyes. His words had partly analyzed him for her:

He was *real*.

He was the most real human being she had ever known, real because he lived a real life, because he appreciated realities; he was sufficient to himself, finding such an interest in life about him that his own impressions and reactions occupied the foreground of his consciousness.

All her life she had been fed on the artificial, living on a soft pad of unrealities which softened and hid the bed-rock foundation of existence from her. Within the last weeks she had had her first taste of the real, was face to face with life and with herself; it had been sweet and inspiring; she felt a great urge for more of that experience and her mind sped ahead into the vague future, the future which her imagination could not even conjure because the new foundation beneath her feet was as yet unfamiliar. But for all that vagueness she thrilled and as she peered forward eagerly she saw this man, this clean, frank man ever at her side. . . .

And yet he had spoken of love as a gamble which did not work itself out in life! A sharp stab of shame shot through her heart, for she had once handled her love as though it

had been a white chip, she had been willing to chance it as a thing of little value and she knew that to him that would be the outraging of a sacred thing.

And again she heard the pronouncement of Hilton: You cannot stand alone! You will fail! A knave, she now knew, but he knew her as she had been. And could he be right? Could she measure up to where a real man's love would not be wasted upon her? She did not know; she dared not think further, so driving back these doubts, she said:

"There's one question I want to ask and I want your honest answer. What is your opinion of Hepburn?"

He looked at her with that twinkle in his eye again.

"In just what way, ma'am?"

"At times he seems reluctant to talk to me, as though he knew more than he wanted to tell and again I've had a notion he didn't want me asking about certain ranch matters at all.

"I confess to you that with all the talk of thieving I've wondered if he didn't know more about it than he gave me to understand, but what he did the other day seems, in all reason, to wipe that suspicion out."

He said: "It seems you've answered your own question. When you've said that he went a long ways to prove that he's the man you want by what he's just done, you've said all there was to say."

"But do you mean that? Are you keeping some suspicion of your own from me?"

He deliberated a moment, then smiled.

"It's easy to suspect but it don't pay very big until you know somethin'. Then you don't need to."

They climbed out of the gulch, horses breathing loudly as they made the last steep ascent and gained the ridge they were to follow and there was little more talk until they stopped and sat looking down across the great flat-bottomed cavity of Devil's Hole. It was a pear-shaped depression, perhaps four miles from rim to rim at the widest point and

fully a score of miles in length. Its sides were sprinkled with cedars which clung to the sheer cliffs determinedly, but its bottom was blanketed with thrifty sage brush, purple in the sunlight that was just then slanting across the floor and beneath this sheen they could see the bright green of new grasses. A dark line marked with the clarity of a map the course of the creek and half way down toward the neck of the Hole was a small cabin erected by the man who had filed on the land for Colonel Hunter and who had drifted on without establishing title.

"There's your neighbor," Beck said.

Jane looked for a moment, then lifted her eyes to the country which showed through the narrow outlet of the deep valley. Behind her endless ridges tossed upward to a sharp horizon, but out through that gap the range lay in a vast basin, rising gently to diminutive lavender buttes plastered against the sky many miles away. It seemed soft and vague and unreal . . . like one of the unreal paintings Beck had seen hanging within walls.

Tom led the way through trees and among upstanding ledges of rock into the narrow, dangerous trail and as he went down, his big roan picking the way quickly yet cautiously, he half turned in his saddle to explain the significance of the descent.

It was the only egress on that side of the Hole. There was one trail on the far side, so steep and hazardous that a man must lead his horse either up or down. The only other outlet was through the narrow Gap where the wash of flood water during storms had made the going easy for men and stock. Out to the northwest, however, lay miles of desert, the great basin of which Jane had had a glimpse, well enough to use for range in three seasons, but in summer it became parched and useless. In the Hole cattle could feed on the abundant gramma, could drink from the creek, but getting them out and over the divide to the more plentiful water of Coyote Creek was an undertaking.

"That's the danger," he told her, "It's a long, hard climb for stock in good shape, but if anything should happen to prevent your stock from drinkin' down here and they should get low from lack of water, why then you'd leave a lot of 'em down there if you tried to bring 'em up."

He pointed over the abrupt drop at his left where a pebble would fall hundreds of feet before striking again and as he indicated his right chap scrubbed the face of the cliff, so narrow was the way to which they clung.

Finally they reached the flat and swung along at a free trot through the brash sage.

"There's water here now," he explained, as they followed the steep creek bank, "but that don't last. It's mighty low right this mornin'. The creek sinks when it don't rain an' its been comin' up in just one spot for years. That's what makes a nester dangerous for you."

They approached the cabin. A mare and a newly born colt eyed them suspiciously. An ancient wagon, its top tattered, its tires red with rust, stood close beside a frail corral. Fire wood was scattered about; here was an axe with a broken helve, there a rust-eaten shovel, and the whole place spoke of poverty.

And yet piled against the cabin was spool upon spool of new barbed wire!

"Fence!" muttered Beck.

"But Mr. Hepburn said—"

"Yeah, I recall what he *said*?"

Just then the canvas which served as a door was thrown back and the girl stepped out. She stood just across the threshold looking at them, sullen and defiant.

"Good-morning," said Jane.

"Howdy," replied the girl indifferently.

An awkward pause. Surely, she would volunteer no more and Beck asked:

"Your dad around?"

"What do you want with him?"—a demand rather than a question.

"I am Miss Hunter. I own the —"

"Oh, I know who you are!" the girl cut in defiantly.

"I came down to talk to your father. We are neighbors. If we are to be good neighbors there are things we must discuss."

Jane was unpoised by the attitude of the other but she dismounted and walked toward the cabin.

"What did you want with him?" the girl asked again.

"I want to ask some things about your plans."

"And what is our business to you?" The girl's eyes snapped and her vivid color intensified.

"It may be a great deal to me. That is why I am frank in coming here. For years this place has been range for H C cattle. Recently water has been short. You have wire and evidently are going to fence.

"I don't come as an enemy. Now that you are here I want to make the best of it."

"But you don't want us here!"

The simple declaration, voiced with that same defiance, confused Jane; then she met the other on her own ground.

"No, we don't want you here unless you will work with us as we all try to work together. I think you will do that because it is the wiser —"

"So you start out workin' with us by lookin' up our claim, the way we filed it, before you come to talk!"

"Yes, I did that,"—frankly. "I wanted to be sure just what your rights were before I came to talk business."

"Well, you know now. You know no lawyers can run us off. Ain't that enough? If you know we've got rights, what do you come here for?" She stopped, but before Jane could reply went on, her eyes flashing sudden heat: "You don't want us here but we've come to stay an' from the way you've started in to talk your business I guess that's all you'll find out."

Jane eyed her for an interval then said:

"You and I are the only women for miles about in this country. We are near neighbors as neighbors go in

the mountains; do you think this is the best way to start in being friends?"

"Who said anything about bein' friends?"

"I want to be your friend." The sincerity of this balked the girl and her eyes became puzzled. "I want to be your friend and want you for my friend. We can help each other in a good many ways."

"I don't recollect askin' for your help."

"No, but I want to give it to you and I want to ask yours in return. We are here in a big country. We are all dependent to an extent on those about us. None of us can get along so well alone as we can by working together."

"Like turnin' folks out in the rain at night, for instance?"

Jane's cheeks flamed.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Think it over an' maybe you will!"

The girl's eyes blazed uncovered hate, but as they took Jane in again from hat to boots a curious envy showed in them.

"I've seen how much you big outfits want to help poor folks before," she said. "I know all about that,"—bitterly. "Maybe it's a good thing you come here today so you'll get to understand, first hand, instead of sendin' your men around to learn things for you.

"We've come a long ways. We've been on th' move ever since I can recollect. Folks have offered to help us before, an' they have helped us . . . to decide to move. We've come to stay here; we can take care of ourselves; we don't ask nothin' but to be let alone, an' we're goin' to be let alone if we have to make it stick with gun play."

She had advanced and, hands on her hips, weight on one foot, spoke the last with her face close to Jane's, her head nodding in slow emphasis.

"I trust it won't come to that," Jane said evenly. She had not flinched, but studied the girl carefully, impersonally,

though the color in her cheeks had died; her face was in repose, her bearing dignified and assured, yet without suggestion of any superficial superiority. "If it does come to that it will not be because I am unwilling to do all that is reasonable. I have come down here to talk to you, which should be evidence of my good faith; I have been frank. You meet me as though I had come to cheat you or drive you out. I don't think that is fair."

The other drew back a step, clearly puzzled again. Her face, in spite of its forbidding expression, was very beautiful.

"That sounds all right," she said at length, "but I've heard it before and I know how much it's worth. You ain't my kind. You don't belong here and I do. You don't want to be my friend . . . you wouldn't know how.

"All we want is to be let alone. Our business ain't yours an' we won't try to make yours ours. Have you said all you wanted to say?"

"No, not quite all, but if you won't listen to me, if you won't believe me, there is only one more thing I can say: You will know where to find me any time you want to talk to me. I will be ready to work with you, to do my share, and maybe a little more. I hope there will be no trouble, for it would force me to make my share of that."

She turned abruptly and walked toward Beck.

The man had purposely held aloof to watch the encounter between the two women. He had been certain that the meeting would be anything but amicable and it was like other situations into which he had let Jane Hunter walk, needlessly and only to see how she would handle herself. Usually the result only amused him but today he had watched Jane bear up admirably under difficult circumstances, refusing to be angered or confused, refusing to plead yet, while retaining dignity, leaving the door to friendship open.

As Jane mounted Bobby Cole stepped back into the cabin

with no word and the riders turned back on the way they had come.

"I've been wonderin'," Beck said after a time, "how this old codger rakes up the dust to buy cattle and wire."

Jane did not reply. She wondered at that, too, but there was another wonder in her mind about another, more human mystery, going back to a night of storm in the heavens and storm in hearts. How did Bobby Cole know she had turned Dick Hilton out?

As they went silently each thinking of significant things which had been revealed the girl threw back the curtain in the doorway and watched them.

"I hate you!" she whispered at Jane Hunter. "I hate you! . . . Because you turned him out . . . because you're . . . you're *you*."

She stood a long time watching them and with the darkness in her face another quality finally mingled: that envy again.

After a time Jane said:

"A queer creature, that girl."

"On the peck from the start!" Beck replied.

"And beautiful!"

"Ain't she, though? . . . Poor kid! I've seen 'em before, kids of movers like that, not so good lookin', not so smart as she is, but like her because they was always suspicious, always ready to scrap. . . .

"That's because they've never had a chance to be decent, brought up in a wagon that way."

"A shame!" Jane whispered.

"I like kids," he said later, as though his mind had been on nothing else. "I like all kids, but I feel sorry for a lot of 'em . . . for most of 'em. . . . Every kid that's born ought to have a chance, a fair show against the world, because the old world don't seem to like kids any too much.

"That girl didn't have a chance, never will have it. She was marked from the day she was born.

"Why, ma'am, one winter I worked for a cow man down in the Salt River valley which is in Arizona. He didn't have a big outfit, he didn't have much luck; trouble with his water, his cattle got sick and his horses didn't do well and he had just one dose of trouble after another.

"But he had three kids, all in a row they seemed,"—indicating progressive heights with his hand. "I think they was the happiest kids I've ever seen. I always think of 'em when I see kids that've had to grow up like that girl. I remember those mornin's when we used to start out for a day's ride, looking back and seeing those kids playing in the dirt beside the rose bushes. Their clothes was dirty the minute they stepped outside and their hands an' faces was a sight from the 'dobe, but there was roses in their cheeks as bright as th' roses on the bushes and they laughed loud and their eyes always smiled . . . like that Arizona sky, which ain't got a match anywhere. . . .

"This man and his wife just buckled down an' bucked old Mister Hard Luck from the word Go, for them kids! They sure thought the world of 'em. I guess that was what put the roses in their cheeks an' the smiles in their eyes. . . .

"I'll never forget those kids by the rose bushes with somebody to care for 'em, an' work their hearts out for 'em. That's the way kids ought to grow up; not like that catamount grew up."

He smiled in reminiscence and his smile was tender.

"Roses and kids," he repeated after a while. "They ought to go together."

He looked at Jane and saw that her eyes were filmed.

She rode closer to him, until her knee touched his chap and said:

"I think that is beautiful: Roses and kids. I shall always remember it; always. . . ."

She knew, now, the man she loved, the man whose love she would win, the man behind that exasperating front of caution. His clear eyes and keen mind were interested only

in realities and yet he could display a tenderness more delicate than she had ever before encountered in men. He was strong, and as gentle as he was strong; he was generous while a skeptic; he had poise and personality. And he could liken love to a poker chip; without using the word make her know that he held love sacred!

She raised her hand to that locket again and held it tightly in her small palm.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FRAME-UP

THE water in Devil's Hole was fenced. It was the Reverend who brought word of the fencing. He had made a circuit of the ranches, holding services and selling pens, and on his way back from the lower reaches of Coyote Creek he stopped to call on the Coles. His visit was not financially productive but he did see long rows of posts set by three Mexicans, and saw wire being stretched on them.

Another thing he saw, which he did not mention to Hepburn: He saw Bobby Cole riding beside a man, a man who did not wear the dress of her country but who wore swagger riding clothes; who did not talk with the self consciousness of a mountain man who rides beside a pretty girl, but who leaned toward her and talked engagingly. so engagingly that the girl lost her hostile attitude and looked up into his face with wide, eager eyes.

The fencing stirred the country as nothing had done since the first and only time sheep bands attempted to come in. There was talk of it in town, there was talk of it when men met on trail or road, there was talk of it in ranch houses down the creek and there was talk of it elsewhere, at length, in stealthy jubilation. . . .

Riley of the Bar Z rode the thirty miles from his ranch to discuss it with Jane Hunter.

"I don't guess you quite understand how serious it is, Miss Hunter," he said after they had talked a time. "Do you realize that if we have a dry summer — and it's startin' out that way — that this is goin' to cut your cattle off some of your best range. It may break you."

"I understand that, Mr. Riley," she said, leaning across her desk, "but there are other things I do not understand and I am inclined to believe that they are of first importance. Without understanding them, this condition can not be remedied."

He gave evidence of his surprise.

"I'm not wanted here," she went on. "I'm not wanted because the H C is a rich prize. It seems to be the accepted opinion that I cannot stay, that I will be unable to stand my ground.

"I want to know *why*! I want to know who is going to drive me out. Some one is behind this nester, I am convinced, and it is the influence behind the things we can see that is dangerous. Loss of range is serious, surely; but by what manner has that range been lost. *That* is what I want to know!"

Riley eyed her with approval.

"I came up here with the idea that you didn't understand but I guess you do," he said quietly. "You've got the situation sized up right, but there's one thing I want to tell you: So far only one blow has been struck; it has fallen on you. The next and the next may fall on you, but every time you are hurt it's goin' to hurt the rest of us. That makes your fight our fight. . . . If you fail, others are likely to fail.

"I've lived here too long in peace after fighting for that peace, to stand by and see trouble start again if I can help it. I'm of the old school, Miss Hunter; your uncle and I came in here together. I think a lot of his ranch and . . . well, if it comes to a fight I can fight again beside his heir as I fought by his side.

"It won't be pleasant for a woman. Cattle wars ain't gentle affairs. They can't be if they're going to be short wars. There's three things to be used; just three: guns an' rope and nerve."

"I trust I can stand unpleasantness if necessary," was her reply.

Riley was impressed with the girl's courage but like the others he was reluctant to believe that she was made of the stuff that could recognize disaster and fight it out, her strength unweakened by panic.

Another visitor was there that day: Pat Webb. Jimmy Oliver had found one of his colts badly cut by wire and had brought it in. Webb had come to see the animal and had lingered to talk intimately with Hepburn.

This gave Beck much to think about.

He was saddling his horse at noon when Hepburn approached and asked his plans for the balance of the day.

"It depends on what I find. I'm after horses first, but I might have a look at other things. There's so damned much happenin' around here that it pays a man to look sharp."

"You'd better cut out that sort of talk, Beck!"

"What talk?"—mockingly. "Seems to me if you didn't know any more than I do you wouldn't be so easily roiled up, Hepburn."

"You mind your business and I'll look after mine," the foreman warned, breathing heavily. "About one more break from you and we'll part company."

His eyes glittered ominously and his face was malicious.

"I wouldn't be surprised. This outfit's a little too small for you and me. It seems to shrink every day, Dad. Maybe, sometime, you'll have to go, but just keep this in your head: I've promised Miss Hunter to stay and my word is good."

He mounted and Hepburn, walking slowly toward the stable, twirled his mustache speculatively, one eye lid drooped as though he saw faintly a plan which promised to solve perplexities.

Beck was cautious that afternoon, as he had trained himself to be when riding alone. He kept an eye on the back trail and scanned both gulches when he rode a ridge; but cautious as he was he did not see the two riders who sat on

quiet horses beneath a spreading juniper tree at the head of Twenty Mile.

It was after dark when he returned to the ranch and the moon was just commencing to show. The others were at supper. He threw his gun and chaps into the bunk house and fed his horse. As he walked down toward the ranch house the other men were straggling out and their dining room was empty. Carlotta brought him steaming food and he ate with gusto.

When he had nearly finished Jane entered and he started to rise, but she made him remain seated.

"What do you suppose that man Webb is doing here?" she asked. "Hepburn explains that he is trying to arrange to send a representative with our round-up."

"Whatever he's doin' here, it ain't for your good," he replied.

"Nor yours."

"Don't you worry about mine, ma'am and unless he's a lot smarter than I think he is, or unless he's got lots of help, don't figure he's goin' to do you any great harm. He's just a low-down —"

A man was running toward the house and he broke off to listen.

Two-Bits came hurriedly into the room, eyes wide, face white, showing none of his usual confusion at Jane's presence.

"Tommy, they want you," he said unnaturally.

"Yeah? What for, Two-Bits?"

"I don't know, Tommy. Hepburn an' Riley an' Webb an' the rest want you. I don't know what it is, Tommy, but it must be serious."

Tom saw the anxiety in Jane's eyes. She did not put her query into words; it was not necessary; he knew and answered:

"I ain't got an idea, ma'am, but I'll go find out. You're all wound up, Two-Bits!" — laughing.

"My gosh, Tommy, they acted funny. Have you done anything?" the cowboy asked in an undertone as they left the house.

"A lot, Two-Bits. I sure hope they don't go proddin' into my awful past! There's some terrible things they might find!"

He hooked his arm through the other's and laughed at the boy's apprehension.

But Beck knew that something of grave consequence impended the instant he set foot in the bunk house for the men, who had been talking lowly, stopped and eyed him in sober silence. Afterward he had a distinct recollection of Two-Bits slipping along the wall, looking at him over his shoulder with the freckles showing in great blotches against his white skin. Hepburn, Riley and Webb sat on one bed. The foreman was leaning back, hands clasping a knee, but he chewed his tobacco with nervous vigor.

"The Reverend about to offer prayer?" Tom asked easily.

There was no responsive smile on any face. Someone coughed loudly and sharply as if it had been an unnecessary cough. Tom halted.

"I'm here. What's up?" he asked quietly. "This is like a funeral . . . or a trial."

At that Hepburn cleared his throat.

"Want to ask you somethin', Beck. I want you to tell these other men what you said to me this noon."

Tom hitched up his belt.

"If you want 'em to know, why don't you speak the piece yourself? You recall it, don't you?"

"Better talk, Tom," Riley advised.

"I don't know what this is all about; I don't know what difference what I said to Hepburn can make to the rest of you, but I respect your opinions, Riley, and if he's willing for you to know what I said, I sure am willing to repeat it.

"Hepburn and I've had a little argument. It's been

goin' on for some time. He'd be pleased to have me move on, I take it, but I sort of like this outfit."

"Go on," Hepburn said impatiently.

"I told you, Hepburn, and I'll tell you again that this ranch is gettin' a little small to hold both of us. It seems to shrink every day and I don't get good elbow room any more, but so far as I'm concerned I'm more or less permanent."

Webb nodded and Riley shifted uneasily, looking from Beck to Hepburn, frankly puzzled.

"Yes, that's what you said to me. Now will you tell the boys where you rode this afternoon?"

Beck eyed him a long moment and the foreman stared back, assured but not quite composed, his little eyes dark. Once he bit his chew savagely but his expression did not change.

"I rode out of here straight up Sunny Gulch, climbed out at the head, rode those little dry gulches as far down as Twenty Mile and came up the far ridge. Then I took a circle to the east and came home by the road."

"You admit bein' at the head of Twenty Mile, then?"

"Admit it? Yes."

"What time?"

"Three o'clock or thereabouts,"—after a pause in which he considered.

"See any other men?"

"Not a man until I got back."

Hepburn looked about. Two-Bits muttered lowly to himself. Riley dragged a spur across the floor slowly. Every eye in the room was on Beck, and Beck's eyes were on Hepburn.

"Then will you tell the boys how come this?"

The foreman drew a gun and holster from behind him. It was Beck's gun. He drew it from the scabbard, broke it and dropped the cartridges into his palm.

Three of the shells were empty.

The two gave one another stare for stare. Hepburn was breathing rapidly but his look was of a man who faces a crisis with all confidence. Beck did not move or speak. His eyes smouldered and his face settled into stern lines. Then that smouldering burst into blaze and before the glare of will the foreman's hand, holding the contents of the revolver chambers, trembled. He closed it quickly and looked away and where a moment before he had been the accuser he was now on the defense. It was determination against determination and in the conflict words were wrung from him.

"Somebody fired three shots at me at the head of Twenty Mile at three o'clock this afternoon."

And that sentence, though it was an indictment, was voiced more in a manner of defense than in accusation. With it Beck's expression changed; it became alert, as though following some play upon which great stakes hung, but following intelligently, not blind to the way of the game.

"I can explain those empty shells. I took a shot at a coyote on the way back. I didn't see you, Hepburn, after I left here this afternoon until I got back."

Webb got up.

"I guess that makes the case," he said to no one in particular.

Then to Tom: "I was with Dad; he was ten rod ahead of me. Th' shots come from above and landed all around him.

"*We* didn't have to look very hard for somebody who wants to get rid of Dad, but we wanted it from you, Beck."

Triumph was in his little beady eyes and on his mottled face. There was a shuffling of feet and Tom hooked one thumb in his belt, with a slow, uncertain movement. His eyes held on Hepburn's face, prying, searching, striving to force a meeting but the other would not look at him, he busied himself stuffing the evidence into his shirt pocket.

Riley rose and the low stir which had followed the revelation subsided.

"Isn't there something else you want to say, Beck?" he asked. "Didn't you see any other man? Can't you say something for yourself?"

"I didn't see another man this afternoon," the other replied, still striving to make Hepburn meet his gaze, "an' besides there don't seem to be much to say. I've told my story. It's simple enough. . . . You've heard the other story, which seems simple enough. Now it's my word against Hepburn's . . . an' Webb's,"—as though the last were in afterthought, and of little matter.

Riley faced the circle of listeners.

"This is no boy's play," he said grimly. "The foreman of the biggest outfit in this country has been shot at, shot at by somebody who didn't come from cover and give him even a fair show for a fight. We know that there's been bad blood between these two men; Tommy's admitted that. I hate like hell to think he lost his head over a quarrel and that he'd fight a man from cover, but it looks bad.

"We can't have this go on! There's been stealing and rumors of stealing for months. There's trouble comin' over water and fence. We've gotten along like good neighbors for years but now trouble seems to be in the air. I don't see that there's much to it but to take Tom to town an' turn him over to the sheriff.

"Unless,"—facing Beck. "Tommy, ain't there anything you want to say? You've refused once but I keep thinkin' you've got something else you could tell us."

"No, Riley, I'd be taking a chance by doing more talkin' tonight. I'll do it when it'll do me more good," he said, but at his own words, brave though they sounded, his heart sank and a rage boiled up in him.

"Then I'm afraid it's jail for you, son," Riley said. "I can—"

"Jail?"

Jane Hunter had stepped into the bunk house. It was

the first time she had ever been there and that was reason enough to rivet attention on her; but now she came under circumstances which were stressed, her face was white, lips parted, eyes wide with a child-like wonder and as she paused on the threshold, one hand against the casing, dread was in every line of her figure.

"Jail?" she repeated in a strained voice. "And why?"

The silence was oppressive and for a breath no one moved or spoke. Beck had not turned to face her; his eyes never left Hepburn's face and it was he who broke the suspense with one word, addressed to the foreman.

"Well?"— a challenge.

Hepburn moved slowly toward the girl.

"There's been a little trouble, Miss Hunter," with an attempt at a laugh, which resulted dismally.

"Trouble?"— with rising inflection.

She took a step forward, looking about at the serious faces. She looked back at Hepburn; then at Beck. Her eyes clung to him a moment, then swept the circle again.

"Trouble? About what? Who is in trouble?"

"I didn't want to bother you with it," her foreman said, his assurance coming back, for Beck had ceased looking at him. "It's a nasty mess; I don't like it. None of us like it. Even if he is inclined to be a little hot-headed, we all thought better of Tom—"

"Tom?"

Slowly she turned to face Beck.

"Yes. Tom. We're. . . . We're sorry, ma'am," Dad stammered; then recovered and with an effort to belittle the situation by his manner proceeded: "Somebody did a small amount of shootin' at me this afternoon. Webb, here, an' I was at the head of Twenty-Mile and somebody fired three times at me. Tom come in tonight with three empty shells in his gun. He . . . He didn't explain well enough to suit us because all he could say was that he fired at a coyote comin' down the road, but —"

"And you're going to take him to jail?"

Her hand had gone slowly to her throat, fingers clamping on the gold locket as if for support. Her eyes had become very dark.

"Well, ma'am, that's about all we can do: turn him over to the sheriff," Hepburn said.

She drew a deep breath, a second interval of tense silence prevailed and then Jane, putting one arm across her eyes, began to laugh. The laugh started low in her throat and rippled upward until it was full and as clear as the ringing of a glass gong. She swayed back against the wall and pressed her extended palms hard against the tough logs. . . .

"On that evidence?" she cried. "On such evidence you would charge a man with attempted murder and turn him over to the law? Because there were empty shells in his revolver?"

"Why, I was with him when he came down the road and he *did* shoot at a coyote . . . three times . . . I heard it; I saw it . . . I was there."

She leaned her head back and her body shook with silent, nervous laughter.

"Praise ye the Lord!" chanted the Reverend, "For his ways are wonderous and strange to behold!"

A babel of comments, loud, profane, excited, relieved, arose. Hepburn stood as if struck dumb, mouth agape and then, face growing dark with a rush of blood under the bronzed skin, he said:

"I thought you said you didn't see a soul!"

"I said I didn't see a man, you pole-cat!" Beck retorted and his eyes danced. Webb sat down on a bunk as though suddenly weakened. Riley, voice husky, took Tom's hand, shook it gravely.

"Why didn't you tell us, my boy?" he questioned.

The rest stopped to hear the answer:

"I didn't want to spill my case before this . . . this *hombre* showed his full hand," he lied.

He turned to look at the other who had lied . . . but Jane Hunter had fled.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BIG CHANCE

HOURS later, after the Reverend had offered a strong, verbose prayer, invoking the wrath of the Almighty upon those who plot to strike from cover, after the bunk house had finally become quiet, Beck stole out into the night.

The moon rode high, flooding the creek bottom with its cold, blue-white light and he stood bareheaded, shirt open at the chest, staring at one bright star which stared back from the edge of the hills. Far off, away down the creek, a coyote yapped and, waiting, cried again and its faint echo reverberated into silence. A horse in the corral stomped and blew loudly. . . .

He moved on down toward the cottonwoods and reaching them stood in their shadows, arms at his sides, shoulders slacked as if weakened, irresolute. The ranch house was dark, its shingles smeared with a sheen of silver by the moon, the veranda in deep black.

Tom did not see her coming until she was halfway across the dooryard. Then, rather heavily, he climbed the wire fence and met her.

Without words of greeting Jane put out her hands and he took them both, holding them between his, looking down into her face silently. Her eyes were dry, but there had been tears on her cheeks, and her lips, as she looked into his smouldering eyes, trembled.

"What were they trying to do to you?" she whispered.

"They were trying to send me to jail for shooting at a man," he answered. "Why did you lie for me?"

"Oh, you were in trouble! I didn't know. I couldn't think. . . . I saw it all so clearly, all in a flash, saw that all

you needed was one little word from someone else to make it right and I didn't care beyond that. It was the only thing that mattered. If they had taken you away I'd have been alone, wholly alone. . . ."

"You believed me when I told 'em I shot at a coyote?"

"Believe? Believe? I didn't think, didn't consider. It made no difference to me what you had done. The only thing I wanted to do was to set you free, to clear you!"

"You'd lie for me, even if you thought I'd shot to kill a man?" he insisted.

"I didn't know what you had —"

"You'd take a chance like that? Why would you, ma'am?"

For a long moment their eyes, half seen to one another in those shadows, clung almost fiercely, his inquisitory, hers changing as wave followed wave of emotion through her body. She had never seen him so dominating, and he had no need to insist again that she answer. She let her head fall back with a half smile.

"Oh, I did it because it was the only thing I could do. . . . I did it, Tom, because I —"

He straightened sharply and cut in:

"I know, ma'am; you did it because you need me here, on the ranch."

His chest swelled with a great breath and he released her hands, stepping back and putting a hand slowly to his head.

For an instant she made no sound. Then she laughed strangely.

"Because I need you here. . . . Yes, that was it. That was why I lied for you." She spoke with nervous rapidity, rather breathlessly, and one hand went again to that locket, clutching it in a cold clasp. "I knew it was not like you to try to shoot a man unfairly. I didn't think here was much chance in lying. All I saw was them taking you away and leaving me here alone to face all this, without anyone I can trust, without anyone to help me. That was why I lied to them."

"You promised me once that you would stay. I knew then that I needed you; every hour since that promise was made I've had a greater realization of my need for you until it . . . it . . ." Her breath caught in a sob and she pressed knuckles to her lips.

Beck stood silently watching her, a cold moisture forming on his brow, hands clenched as if he were holding himself against the urge of some great impulse.

"I felt when I stepped in there and learned what it all was, that the last thing I have to depend on was slipping away . . . and I reached out and grasped you like I'd grasp a straw in a sea. It . . . I can't tell you,"—her voice trembled, "what it meant, what it means to me. . . ."

Words, words! They spilled from her lips with a rapidity that approached hysteria. She was talking without thought, without reason, letting her voice run on while her consciousness, divorced entirely from it, fell into chaos.

"Everything seems to be working against me and now, because you have been my help, my strength, they are trying to take you away. Oh, I need all the help there is, and that is you!"—with a stamp of the foot as she drove tears back.

"There are influences which I can't see, which I can only feel, all about me, within me,"—beating her breast—"and outside."

"It may be interestin' to you to know that I didn't shoot at any coyote."

She gasped lightly and for a moment did not speak.

"Then you did shoot at Hepburn?"—in a whisper.

"No, I didn't. I'd never shoot from cover."

"I knew that," she said quickly, knowing that by her question she had hurt him.

"It appears that I ain't very welcome with your foreman. It was a frame-up, a good way to get rid of me. They planted that evidence in my gun while I was eating. It was one of those influences at work, the kind you've only felt. You can see some of 'em now, ma'am. . . ."

"It's lucky you thought to lie," he said, with a weak laugh that was unlike him. "I guess you're going to need all your luck. . . ."

"But you better go in now. It's late and cold."

He wanted her to be away from him, to be rid of her presence, for it pulled him, drew him, and he fought against it, fought against the strongest impulse that has been born to man, fought blindly, his old, deeply rooted caution, dragging him back . . . dragging him. . . .

"I don't want to go in; I don't want to leave you," she said. "I want—"

"But you must go. Have I got to pick you up an' carry you into your house, ma'am?"

"I want you to take this," she went on where he had interrupted, fumbling at the catch of the chain which held the locket against her throat. "Take it," she said, holding it swinging toward him, spattered with moonlight. "It's brought me all the luck I've ever had; it will help you, it will protect you. You need luck as much as I do . . . and you need it for me. Wear it, a foolish little trinket but it means . . . oh, more than you can know! I'd like to think of you as wearing it. . . ."

"I don't think I need that, ma'am. What's in it?"

"Don't ask that! Don't even open it, please. Just take it and wear it, for me."

He made no move to take the ornament, just stood looking at it skeptically.

"Take it . . . and then I will go in, without being carried."

She reached up to place the chain about his neck with her own hands; her unsteady fingers, fumbling with the catch, slipped and her cool, bared arms, touched his flesh. At the contact she swayed against him.

"Oh, carry me in," she pleaded gently, "carry me in . . . not into my house, but into your life!"

All the caution, all the reason he had summoned to hold back that urge was swept aside. The touch of her skin

against his skin sent seething blood to the ends of his limbs. It did not need her plea to break him down; the touch accomplished it, and fiercely, roughly, he caught her to him.

"It's all been a lie, another lie, all this you've said!" he cried lowly. "You didn't lie tonight because you need me; you lied because you love me, ma'am! You love me, like a good woman can love, and I love you. . . . I love you, ma'am, like I never thought I could love. It's bigger than I am, bigger than all the rest of my life. . . .

"From that first night you talked to me I've been afraid I was goin' to love you. That was why I planned to go away because I didn't want to take a chance with my love. It's the only sacred thing I've ever owned and I've kept it back, savin' it for the time when I could turn it loose. . . .

"When you told me you'd made up your mind to stay here, that you wanted to do something that was real and worth-while, I felt that I couldn't hold it back. . . .

"But I didn't know you. I got to love you so much I was afraid of you, afraid of myself. That was why I bullied you, that was why I picked on you. I tried to drive you away from me, I tried, even, to keep from bein' your friend, but somethin' told me all the time that this had to come.

"I've watched you grow strong and big. I've hurt you on purpose. I've made some things hard for you to do, but you've done 'em. You're like a man, in the way you stand up to things . . . and the gentlest, the sweetest woman down in your heart!"

"Not that!" she pleaded. "Not all that. I'm not what you think, I'm only what you can make me. I'm weak and need it. I want to be carried . . . along and upward by it!"

Chin drawn in, he looked down into her face as she lay in his arms, her breath quick and fast and warm on his cheek. He could feel his limbs vibrate as his pulse leaped

and his whole body trembled as he read the look in her eyes, revealed by the moonlight.

Up on the hills a little owl hooted and again the coyote yapped. A vagrant night wind touched the trees above them and the leaves whispered sleepily, as if roused by a pleasant dream. The murmur of the creek sounded almost as a blessing. None of these they heard. They were lost in a vague, limitless world, alone, swayed by the most powerful, the most beautiful forces in life.

"You lied because you love me," he whispered.

And at that she stirred and her breath slipped out in a long sob. He lowered his face to hers as scalding tears brimmed from her eyes. He felt them on his cheek, mingled with her breath and he felt her arms tighten about his neck, her body draw closer to his.

"It wasn't any chance!" he whispered fiercely. "It wasn't any chance, and I've been holdin' back, fighting it off, denying it to myself for weeks . . . afraid to risk it, afraid to let it come out . . . afraid of what is *so*!"

"Isn't it a chance?" she asked almost in a gasp. "Isn't it? Are you sure, Tom?"

"As sure as I am that the moon is up there, Jane."

He lowered his lips to hers and for a long kiss they clung.

"But you don't know—you don't know!" she cried, suddenly struggling to be free. "You don't know me," pressing her palms against his chest as he held her. "It's big, it's fine . . . the biggest, the finest thing that has ever come into my life.

"Tom! What if it should be a chance?"

"But, Jane it can't—"

With a faint little cry, almost as though she were hurt, she broke from him and fled toward the house through the moonlight.

He stood alone, the feel of her lips still on his, heart leaping, mind swirling. And, looking down, he saw that in his hand he held the little gold locket.

CHAPTER XV

WAR!

SO, for Jane and Tom, at least, Hepburn came into the open.

And for Hepburn, these two displayed their hands.

Of greater consequence, Beck's reserve, his caution was swept away. He had taken his big chance!

"You're all there is to me," he told Jane the following morning with a desperation in his eyes and a seriousness in his voice that made her search his face with alarm. "I fought against my love for you but it wasn't any use. You *made* me love you. You'll make me keep lovin' you, won't you, Jane?"

"I hope so! You don't know how much I hope so!" she assured him as her arms clasped his neck closely. "It frightens me, having this responsibility. It's the greatest I've ever had and I'm weak, Tom, a weak woman!"

"No, strong!" he declared and stopped her further protest with kisses.

Dad Hepburn, of course, could not stay on under the circumstances.

"There's an advantage of having a reptile in sight if you've got to have one in the country," Beck told Jane as they discussed the matter, "but he won't stay. He's got an excuse to back out gracefully now and we haven't any excuse to keep him on."

"And will you be my foreman?" she asked.

"If you'll trust me that far," he replied with the laugh in his eyes again.

Hepburn departed that day, telling Jane that he would like to stay but that he did not feel like risking his life for the sake of a job, to which she made no reply other than

writing his check. This nettled him; he did not meet her gaze because, though they both had lied, her guilt was white while his was smirched with treachery.

His farewell to Beck was not open but his successor read in it an ominous quality.

"I wish you luck on your job, Beck," he said as he mounted, ready to ride away. "Lots of luck."

"Mostly bad luck, Hepburn?" Tom taunted and the flush that whipped into the face of the older man was not that of humiliation.

He reined his horse away with a growl and did not look back.

If the little gold locket which Tom wore about his neck brought luck, it supplied a dire need. He had two determined personal enemies in the country, Webb and Hepburn, and as foreman of the H C he had many others, identities not fully established.

There was Cole and the Mexicans he had hired to build the fence and clear his land. There was the usual gathering of riff-raff at Webb's. And there was Sam McKee, the coward, who was not reckoned as a menace by Beck and who, in later days, was to figure so largely!

Another piece of news the Reverend brought:

"They're talkin' about you in town, brother. They're saying that now some of this thieving will stop. They're looking to you to clean up the country."

"Ain't that a lot of responsibility to put on one peaceful citizen?" Beck asked, but though he jested over the fact he did not fail to appreciate its significance.

"Be cautious. These men are without scruple, brother."

"And so am I . . . but I got lots of luck, Reverend!" was his parting.

He needed his luck.

Riding alone, under a rim rock, with the country falling away to the westward, he speculated on his luck and on the talisman Jane had given him. He drew the locket from his shirt front and held it on his big palm eyeing the thing,

wondering what it contained that Jane had wanted to conceal from him.

"I've got a half grown notion to open it," he muttered and stopped his horse shortly.

And he might have sprung the lid had not a zipping and a dull, dead spatter on the rock just ahead caught his attention. He looked up sharply, saw the stain of metal against the ledge and saw in the sunlight a fragment of the bullet that had shattered itself there, that would have drilled him had his horse taken the next step.

Whoever fired had calculated on that next step because he was at such a distance that no report of a rifle reached him.

Beck turned his horse and raced to cover and lay for an hour scanning the country, but his assailant did not appear.

When Tom rode away he smiled grimly to himself and said to the roan:

"We won't look in it now. Stoppin' to consider saved our skin that time; maybe we'll need that luck again . . . and worse."

Another time, the same week, he threw his bed on a pack horse and started a two-day ride to the south-east for, as foreman, he gave close heed to the detail of his work.

At sundown he made camp and while his coffee boiled stripped himself and bathed luxuriously in a waterhole.

He lay looking upward at the stars that night thinking more of Jane Hunter than her property, thrilling at memory of her hair and eyes and lips, telling himself that conditions were reversed now, and that instead of fighting her off, evading her charms, he was consumed with an eagerness for them.

Drowsiness came and, turning on his side, he reached a hand for the locket to hold it fast while he slept. It was not about his neck. He remembered that he had left it on a rock where he had undressed for his bath and, slipping

out of his blankets, turning them back that the night chill might not dampen his bed, he picked his way carefully to the place and groped for the trinket.

His fingers had just touched the gold disc when the quiet of the night was punctured by a shot . . . then four more in quick succession.

He squatted low, holding his breath. He heard booted feet running over rocks, heard a man speak gruffly to a horse and, in a moment, heard galloping hoofs carrying a rider away. He waited a half hour, then stole back to his bed. The tarp and blankets were drilled by five bullet holes.

"Maybe I'm superstitious," he muttered, fastening the gold chain about his neck, "but this thing, or whatever is in it, has saved my hide twice in one week."

The man who had fired into his blankets had trailed him deliberately, had waited until satisfied that he was asleep and had stolen up to murder him without offering a fighting chance.

"Hepburn has gone into partnership with Webb," Jane told him on his return to the ranch. "The Reverend brought in that word. What do you make of it?"

"Not much. Without my help it makes about the finest couple of snakes that could be brought together!" Tom muttered.

"And somebody tampered with the ditch in the upper field. Curtis and the men started the water down late in the afternoon. They left their tools there and the ditch bank was broken. They tell me it surely was shoveled out. The water is low and losing it hurt."

"That looks quite like war," he told her.

War it was. That night the men in the bunk house were awakened by a bright glare and looking out Beck saw that four stacks of hay, totaling more than a hundred tons of feed left from the winter, were in a blaze. While the others hastily dressed and ran toward the stack yard in the futile

hope that some portion might be saved, the foreman stayed behind . . . listening. From far up the road he heard the faint, quick rattle of a running horse.

In the morning a note was found stuck in the latch of the big gate. It was addressed to Jane Hunter and, in a rude scrawl, had been written:

"The longer you stay the more you will lose."

She showed it to Beck and after he had read and re-read and turned the single sheet of paper over in his hands he looked up to see her eyes tear filled.

"It isn't worth it!" she cried with a stamp of her foot. "This is only the start. Do you know what they are saying in town? The word has been passed that first you are to be driven out and that then I will have to go. People are saying that the others are too many and too ruthless for you, that they are bound to drive us away. It is being said that you are too straight to win a crooked fight!

"I could risk losing the things I own, my property, but I wouldn't risk you, Tom dear . . . I wouldn't do that!"

"And there's somethin' else you wouldn't do," he said lowly, stroking her forehead. "You wouldn't let 'em drive you out. You didn't start that way. You come out here to beat the game and if you quit cold you wouldn't think much of yourself, would you? We didn't want trouble, but we've got to go and meet it!"

"But you!" she moaned, putting her arms about his big shoulders. "What of you?"

"Don't worry about me when the only danger is from men that won't come into the open! Maybe I'm a bigger crook than I'm given credit for. Besides, you've given me lots of luck. . . .

"I don't know what's in this thing,"—holding out the locket—"but I've got a lot of faith in it . . . and in you, Jane!"

Where, before he gave his love recognition, he had taken pains to bring Jane into contact with adversities, he now was impelled to shield her from all that he could. In the

natural rôle of her protector he did everything possible to allay her apprehension. He could not blind her to the broad situation but he could and did withhold the seriousness of some of its detail, even keeping some things that transpired, such as the attempts on his life, to himself.

But he did worry about the enemy that worked from cover, that shot at sleeping men, that broke ditches and burned property and sent unsigned threats to women. That made his fight a battle in the darkness and his strength was the strength of light, of frankness, of honesty. His mind was not adapted to scheming and skulking.

To drive his foe into the open was his first objective and that night he set out.

"You call it recognizing a state of war, I believe," he told Jane with a twinkle in his eye when she queried his going.

"Tom! You're not going—"

"Not going to take a chance," he said soberly. "It's just a diplomatic mission, you might say."

He put her off and rode out of the ranch gate. It was dark and when he had progressed a mile he halted his horse, dropped off, loosened the cinch so the leather would not creak when the animal breathed, and stood listening. Aside from the natural noises of the night, the world was without sound.

He drew his gun from its holster and twirled the cylinder. Usually he carried the trigger over an empty chamber; tonight it was filled. And inside his shirt was another gun.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WARNING

THE fire in Webb's cook stove was not all that furnished warmth to the three men sitting about it that night, for they drank frequently from the bottle which, when not passing from hand to hand, was nestled on Dick Hilton's lap, his hands caressing its smooth surface lovingly . . . save the word!

Sam McKee and three other men played solo on the table, noisily and quarrelsome after the manner of their kind. Engrossed in the game they gave little heed to the talk of the others. It was shop talk, of plots and schemes, of danger and distrust.

Webb's little button eyes were even more ugly than usual, Hilton's mouth drawn in lines that were even more cruel, but Hepburn, under influence of the liquor, only became more paternal, more deliberate as the evening and the drinking went on. He was not nettled by Webb's disfavor, and even smiled on the rancher indulgently as he listened to the querulous plaint.

"If you'd only used yer head an' stayed there," Webb went on, "then we'd hev had it all easy-like. You could 've stole her blind an' she'd never knew. Then you had to git on the peck about *him*!" He sniffed in disgust.

"Now, Webb, you're too harsh in what you say," the other replied blandly. "I done all I could but Beck wouldn't be blinded! He's got second sight or somethin',"—with a degree of heat.

"We had him scotched all right, but we hadn't figured on the girl. Nobody'd thought she was sweet on him!"

Hilton stirred uneasily and the color in his face deep-

ened. He looked at Hepburn with an ugly light in his eyes.

"That upset everything," Hepburn went on. "There wasn't no use tryin' to play a quiet game after that. They both know we want to get rid of 'em worst way and now we've got to keep under cover an' use our heads harder'n ever."

"There's too many in it," Webb whined. "I tell you the's too many in it! If you'd let me alone, just me an' the boys, I'd felt safer. But now there's Cole an' his daughter an' . . . half the country!"

He flashed an indecisive glance at Hilton who studied the bottle, frowning.

"Lots in it," Hepburn said heavily, "but they've got to hang together or . . ."

"Separately," added Dick cynically.

Hepburn nodded and Webb shifted and jerked his head petulantly.

"But there's nothin' to fret about," Dad went on. "None of us will be a leak. Cole can't because we could put him behind bars by just lettin' on that he'd used his homestead rights under another name an' had no right on this place, let alone other things.

"We can use his brand, which is why I brought him in here. I've spread the news that he's bought cows of you an' between workin' over the H C and ventin' your marks we'll have a herd here in a couple of seasons that'll make us rich!

"An' we'll have range for 'em, too. She won't stand up under a range war!"

"But Beck will," Webb protested.

"He will if you don't get rid of him!" with slow anger behind the words and a cunning glitter in his eyes. "I don't see how in hell you missed him. You must 've been drunk!"

"He wasn't in his bed, I tell you. He couldn't 've been!"

"Well, if I had against him what you got, I'd get him,"

Hepburn stated emphatically, well satisfied, and showing it, that this was a masterly stroke. "He made you laughed at by the whole country."

"You wait," Webb snarled. "My time's comin'!"

"Deliberately, I'd say," Hilton put in ironically.

"Oh, you're always kickin'!" Webb protested. "I don't see why you stay on if things don't satisfy you. You've got to have sheets on your bed, you've got to have grub cooked different, you've got to sleep late an' you've got to have hot water to wash and shave always when th' kettle's cold! You've got into this deal an' you'd like to run it your way."

"What the hell do you stay on for?"

Hepburn looked at Hilton's face as though he, too, wondered just why he stayed on, but, pursuing his usual tactics, he said:

"Why, if Mr. Hilton can pay for it, why can't he have his way? He has the money. He's willing to spend it. I'm sure his willingness to stake Cole to fence and hired help means a lot to all of us, Webb. That's goin' to drive her out of the Hole entire this summer."

"The booze has made you irritable, Webb."

Webb sat forward, elbows on knees, chin in his hands and grumbled:

"I have to stand a lot, I do. Both of you eggin' me on all the time, all the time! I do th' best I can, but nothin's ever satisfactory. Nobody ever does anything for me!"

"Sho, Webb, that ain't so. Didn't Mr. Hilton give you a brand new automatic? Ain't I been reasonable in turnin' a chance to make good your way?"

The other fidgeted, then looked up at Hilton.

"I don't see why *you've* got such an interest in this for, anyhow. Course, it's none of my business, but I don't see why you should always egg me on about Beck."

"I am concerned to see the T H O prosper," said Hilton mockingly. "That is why I bought fence; that is why I want your friend, the H C foreman, out of the way."

He rose, placed the bottle on the table and stepped out of the house. They heard him walk across the dooryard and into the stable.

"You s'pose he's goin' to meet her again tonight?" Webb growled.

"Likely. . . . It's likely."

"I wish th' hell he'd clear out. I don't see what you wanted to take him in for!"

Hepburn chuckled.

"How could you keep him out? The girl, she knows everything, an' what she knows he knows. His money's valuable to us an' besides . . . it'll keep her quiet if we ever do get out on a limb."

Webb looked up in query.

"You're right when you say there's too many in it, Webb, but there's just *one* too many. That's the girl! I can't figure her out; I can't trust her. If we was to try to pass the buck to Cole, in a pinch, she'd raise the deuce. . . . That is, she would if it wasn't for Hilton."

"How's that?"

"If she turned on the rest of us, it'd catch Hilton an' she's gone on him. Never saw a girl who was so loyal to her father but when you bring in another man that loyalty won't stand up in a pinch; not if it's a choice between a father and a lover."

"But he ain't on the level with her!"

"Makes no difference. She's took to him like girls of her sort do. He can handle her an' she's the only one that knows our side who'll ever need any handlin'. He was right when he said the rest of us'd have to hang together, or separately."

Outside a horseman rode quietly to the gate and sat looking through the open doorway and the one window of the room. He counted the men carefully; counted again, then rode back the way he had come and stopped and waited.

"But what about the other girl . . . Hunter?" Webb asked after a silent interval. "Hilton *was* sweet on her."

Hepburn's eyes kindled.

"His jealousy is another asset. Hilton wanted her an' couldn't get her, an' he knows the reason now: It's Beck. You think he's been practicin' with a rifle and pistol for the fun of it? Not on your life!" Leaning closer: "The time may come, Webb, when Hilton'll clear Beck out of our way. . . . That'd be easier. I don't want to try it in the open; I don't guess you do. He's got a crimp in all the boys. Look at Sam, for instance. He's itchin' to kill Beck but he ain't got the sand!"

"If she ever found out he wasn't on the level with her," — Webb's mind going back to Bobby Cole — "she'd claw him up fearful."

"Yup. But she's in love an' love plays hell with men and women, Webb."

The other started to reply, then sat rigid, listening.

A horse came up the road at a slow trot and halted by the gate. A saddle creaked, then the bars complained as the were lowered. A man was whistling lightly as he rode toward the house and dismounted, leaving his horse standing.

"Must be one of the boys," he said, and settled back. None who had other than friendly business there would come uncautious.

"I was going to say," went on Hepburn, "that they'll be fooled about that Hole range. It's time for the cattle to start comin' in from the desert. They'll get up there and the creek'll be an ash bed with a couple more days of this sun. They can't take 'em back through the Gap without a big loss and if they leave 'em in the Hole without water long enough they can't get 'em up the trail without loss so —"

"If you'll all rise up and put up your hands we won't have any trouble . . . tonight!"

Hepburn looked slowly over his shoulder, slightly bewildered. Webb, who had been stooped forward, raised his eyes and breath slipped through his lips in a long hiss. Sam McKee, who had reached out to take a trick, let his ace

drop from limp fingers. The other three started up like guilty men sharply accused of their crime.

Tom Beck, a revolver in each hand, stood framed in the doorway, bending forward from the hips, hat back, eyes burning. His voice had been level and natural, with something akin to a laugh in it, but when he spoke again it was a rasp:

"Get up on your rattles, you snakes, and put up your hands!"

With an oath Hepburn sprang to his feet, faced about and raised his arms. Webb followed, with jerky movements, his face pallid with fear. The four card players got from their chairs. As McKee's hands went slowly above his head they trembled like aspen branches in a breeze.

For a long moment there was no sound, save Hepburn's heavy breathing. Then Tom Beck let a curious smile run across his lips.

"This is a hell of a way to come to talk business," he commented. "I don't like it . . . but little more than you seem to. It's the safest way for me. That's why I'm here, to consider my safety."

He let his gaze run from face to face. Webb's eyes met his squarely, a baleful challenge in them, but as he glared at Hepburn, Hepburn's gaze wavered, flicking back twice, only to drop again. McKee whimpered under his breath. The other three stared back sullenly, alert for an opening.

Beck moved into the room just one step.

"I don't know who it is that's been tryin' to kill me, but it wouldn't take many guesses," he said. Again his eyes ran from face to face. "It might be you, Hepburn, and it might be you, Webb. It's like both of you, to shoot from cover . . . like you accused me of shootin'. It might be McKee, but even that takes more nerve than he's got. I wouldn't put it past any of the rest of you.

"I didn't come here to try to find out. I got more important things to do than to identify the party right now.

"I rode over this evening to make a little call an' to drop

the word that if I see any of this outfit anywhere near the H C ranch or on its range there's goin' to be shootin' a-plenty and that if you want to be the first to shoot, you want to draw almighty quick! If any of you see one of my men anywhere, you hit the breeze. It's the best way out of trouble.

"Hepburn, you an' Webb tried to frame me once. That's sufficient cause. I'd kill you like I'd kill a . . . a scorpion. McKee don't count. You other three probably are in on the threat to drive me out of the country. Just workin' here puts you beyond the law that protects honest men.

"Now there's a little matter of trouble that's happened around the H C. That's going to stop from now on. We've got lots of men over there who are handy with their artillery. They're pretty well worked up. There won't be a finger lifted to prevent you workin' within your rights, but the first crooked move one of you makes . . . there'll be a new table boarder in th' devil's kitchen.

"That's all I come to say. That's all the conversation that'll be necessary between us from now on. The H C is goin' to keep doing business, and it's present owner is going to stay on the job. As for me . . . it's been talked around that I was to be drove out an' all I've got to say is, come on and do your driving!"

His mouth set with an expression of finality and his eyes bored into theirs. He was through, but even as he straightened preparatory to backing through the doorway into the night a flicker of cunning crossed Dad Hepburn's face, set there by a faint, faint creaking of the stable door, unheard by Beck whose own voice had been in his ears.

"Don't you think you're a little quick in passin' judgment, Tom?" he asked.

Beck laughed shortly.

"Looking for me to handle you with gloves, Dad? After you tried to frame me? After you—" He checked himself shortly as he was about to accuse Hepburn of one

specific art of treachery against the H. C. He might need that later. "After you've tried to get me?"

"No, somebody shot at my bed one night; somebody shot at me while I was riding open country one day." At that a glint of astonishment showed in Webb's face. "There's just one way to handle men like that, and I'm doin' it now, to-night. I'm —"

The crash of a shot from behind, the splintering of the door panel at his shoulder, cut him short. Webb jumped as though the bullet had been sent at him. Hepburn's face contorted into a grimace of elation.

With a catch of his breath Beck wheeled, senses steeled to this emergency, driving down the quick panic that wanted to throttle his heart.

There in the shaft of yellow light, bareheaded, stepping toward him, arm raised to fire again, was Dick Hilton. It was a situation in which fractions of time were infinitely precious. That first shot had gone wild because the Easterner, unfamiliar with fire arms, unnerved by the rage which swept up within him, had let his eagerness have full sway. But now he was stepping forward, coming closer. At that range he could not miss!

And Beck saw all that in the split second it required for him to whirl, leaving his back exposed to those other men for the instant. He squeezed the trigger as he flipped his left-hand gun toward his assailant. The two reports sounded almost as one, but the stream of fire from Hilton's weapon instead of stabbing toward Beck streaked into the air and the automatic, ripped from his hand by the same ball that tore his fingers, spun clinking to earth.

But even as it struck, before Beck could turn again to cover the room behind, a swinging palm sent the lamp crashing to the floor. He sprang clear of the doorway. An instant before he had dominated the situation, now he was a fugitive.

Inside, darkness; out in the dooryard, starlight. Inside, ruthless enemies who had listened to a declaration that pre-

cluded quarter; outside, their target who could not hope to live before the fusillade that must come.

"Put up your hands!" Beck gasped, jabbing a gun into Hilton's stomach and springing behind the Easterner's body, screening himself.

Crouched there, peering over the other's shoulder, one gun against Hilton's trembling body, the other thrust past it to cover the doorway, he paused. He heard quick, unsteady footsteps, an oath, a hurried word and then the man before him cried huskily:

"For God's sake don't shoot, boys! You'll get me!"

After that there passed a moment in which Hilton's breath made the only sound that came to Beck's ears.

"I'm going to back up to my horse," he said lowly, "you follow me."

It was unnecessary to add a threat. Enough threat in the situation!

Slowly he began to back, feeling his way, shoving the one gun harder against Hilton's body, keeping the other ready for instant use should those who watched choose to shoot down the Easterner to be at him. The roan snorted softly in query and Beck spoke. But the animal, startled by the shooting, unsatisfied that this huddle creeping toward him was wholly friendly, backed off. Tom spoke again; then ceased all movement, for from inside had come a muttering and stealthy footsteps crossed the floor. A door at the rear of the house creaked. One or several had gone out to stalk him! The others, he knew, waited within to take first opportunity to kill that might be offered.

"Stand still!" he said sharply to the horse and turned his head ever so quickly to see the animal, head to him, back slowly.

He moved backward faster for a few steps, shoving the revolver harder into Hilton's body to assure his obedience, but the horse only progressed as rapidly, snuffing loudly at this performance which no horse could be expected to understand!

They moved in a circle, swinging in toward the house, Beck ever keeping Hilton as a direct screen. He stopped and the horse stopped. He listened. He heard soft movements within the house. He thought he heard a faint rustling behind a far corner of the building but a cow, bawling at the moment, obscured the faint sound.

Beck felt a cold damp standing out on his body. From the darkness, from any direction, disaster might strike at any second!

He began to talk to the horse soothingly, moving toward him slowly, but the roan would not understand. Once he was within an arm's length of the bridle, but before he could grasp it the animal had swung his head ever so slightly and was moving off again, passing a corner of the house from where that suggestion of a rustle had come.

And then, of a sudden, the horse leaped sideways, with a startled grunt, as a horse will that comes upon a coiled snake. He lunged toward Beck and Hilton, swinging about on his hind feet, beginning to run for the gate, thoroughly frightened and bent on escape from the thing that alarmed him.

It was Beck's last chance! As the horse leaped toward the gate he sprang back a pace from Hilton, raised both guns and fired, one at the window, one at the doorway. Glass burst and tinkled and he heard the panel of the door again sliver. As he opened fire the great roan swerved; his hoofs spurned the ground in the impatience of fright and Beck, shooting again toward the house, turned and ran swiftly for the fleeing horse.

Down in the shadows the thing which had frightened the horse rose, stumbling into shape. Flame streamed from Beck's guns toward it, but he shot as he ran and his fire was inaccurate. He cried sharply as the animal swung even wider in his circuit toward the gate, sprang forward in long strides, dropped the gun from his right hand, leaped, fastened his fingers about the horn, took two quick strides and vaulted into the saddle.

The animal leaped the half lowered bars and Beck fired again, twice at the house, once at the figure outside, and then flung himself far down over the roan's shoulder as the window belched flame and stabs of it came from about the building and bullets screeched overhead. He fanned the roan's belly with his hat and twenty rods further swung into an erect position again, leaning low as they ate the road.

"A close one, old timer!" he muttered to the horse. "*That* was a chance!"

And miles further on, when the roan had cooled from his first desperate dash that had carried Tom to unquestionable safety for the night, he said aloud:

"Now what was *he* doin' there? And how much will he count?"

CHAPTER XVIII

HIS FAITHFUL LITTLE PONY

IN the days that followed you might have seen approaching from a distance a rider for the H C. Watching, you would have noticed that he stopped his horse, rode on, stopped again, rode on and stopped the third time. Had you not halted and repeated the performance he would not have come toward you and, on coming within eyesight, you might have seen him sitting with a hand on his holster, or rifle scabbard — for the deadlier weapons appeared — carelessly enough, outwardly, but latent with disaster. For war had been declared. Jane Hunter's men were ready for trouble, waiting for trouble, but it did not come at once for though Hepburn and Webb and their following hated Tom Beck for the man he was they respected him and gave heed to his warning to stay away from H C property . . . or at least not to be seen thereabouts.

The war went on, but it was a silent, covert struggle, and though Beck suspected happenings, he could not know all that transpired.

For instance:

It was Webb who finally dropped the pliers and declared the job finished, standing back to survey the stout cedars which had been bound together with wire to form a gate for one of the numerous little blind draws that stabbed back into the parapet which surrounded Devil's Hole. In the recesses of that draw was the smallest amount of seeping water, enough, say, to keep young calves alive. From a distance of a hundred yards this barricade of tough boughs and steel strands would not be detected.

Again:

They came up from the mouth of the Hole after dusk had fallen, Bobby Cole and her father, the old horses drawing the wagon along the indistinct track which wound through the sage. They were tired and silent and finally the girl's head dropped to Cole's shoulder and she slept, with his arm about her, holding her close, his lids and mustache and shoulders drooping.

The wagon halted, hours later, before the blocked draw and, straddled upon their bodies, the girl liberated first one calf, then another, until six had been shoved from the tail gate into the hidden pen. Then they drove back toward their cabin.

"Why don't I think it's wrong to steal?" the girl asked soberly.

Alf shook his head. "It ain't . . . for us. . . ."

"But I've read that it is," she protested, scowling into the darkness. "I read it in a book, about a man that stole; that book said it was wrong. Why don't I think it's wrong?"

She turned her face to him and he looked down to see, under the starlight, her mouth pathetically drooping, her lips trembling, and the big brown eyes filled with perplexed tears.

"Why 'm I so different from other folks? Maybe that's why I never had no friends. . . ."

"It ain't wrong for you to steal from her," he said defensively.

The girl looked ahead again.

"No, it can't be. I hate her . . . I like to steal from her. But why ain't it wrong for me if it's wrong for anybody else?"

"I've allus told you it was the thing to do. Ain't that enough?" he asked wearily. . . .

"Did you see him this mornin'?"—as if to change the subject.

Bobby nodded her head.

"He was down. He hurt his hand; got it shut under Webb's window. He . . . He stayed a long time."

Her voice was quite changed; rather soft and reverent. "I'm glad he did. When he's there I feel like I ain't so different . . . not so awful different from other folks. . . ."

Alf did not reply. The wagon chucked heavily on, the brush scratched the wagon bed, the horses plodded listlessly. Dawn came. . . .

Another thing:

Far out to the north and west of the Gap in Devil's Hole was a natural reservoir, Cathedral Tank. Winter floods were stored there and long after surrounding miles of quickly growing grasses had become useless as range because of the lack of drink, this tank afforded water for the H C cattle. Late in the Spring, of course, it became scum covered and fetid but until the caked silt commenced to show on the boulder basin the cattle would cling there, saving higher range for later use. Then, in other years, they would drift up toward the Hole, graze through the Gap and water in the creek until the round-up caught and carried them into still higher country.

This spring the desert tank was of far greater importance than ever before. The Hole was closed to the H C unless rain fell, and the days were uniformly clear, so it was wisdom to delay the round-up until the tank was emptied, then shove the cattle straight past the mouth of the Hole and start them up country from the lower waters of Coyote Creek. Beck rode to the tank himself and arranged his plans in accordance with the water he found.

But after Beck had been there another horseman made the ride, leaving the timber at dusk, shacking along across the waste country in a straight line for the tank. Cattle, bedded for the night about the water hole, stirred themselves as he approached and dismounted, then stood nearby and watched a strange proceeding. The man found a crevice in the rock basin, scraped deeply into it with a clasp knife. Then he wedged in five sticks of dynamite with stones and, finally, rolled boulders over them.

He led his horse far back after the fuse had been spit, but even where he stood, outside the circle of steers, rock fell. After the explosion had died into the night he pulled at his mustache and regained his saddle rather deliberately, chuckling to himself.

The fact that a steer with a broken leg was bawling loudly and that another, its life torn out of its side, moaned softly in helplessness, did not impress him. He rode back as he had come.

There was little time for love making in the life of the H C foreman. More riders were necessary for the round-up and he was particular about the men he hired. The country had taken sides; rather, it was either openly behind Beck in his handicapped fight, though skeptical of his chances for winning or openly forecasting failure for him and Jane Hunter; and of the latter Tom had his doubts. Many of them were not neutral, he knew.

But he was with Jane when he could be although, since he had declared himself to Webb and Hepburn, he did not permit her to ride far from the ranch, even when with escort. He wanted her witness to no tragedy, and tragedy impended.

Of the motives of Webb, Hepburn, Cole and their following he had no doubts but there was one whose reasons were a mystery to him. He studied this long hours, when at work, when lying sleepless on his bunk and even when with Jane Hunter. Hilton was at Webb's and that was enough to brand him . . . but how deeply? He hesitated to enlist her aid in the solution but when he had spent days puzzling to no result he said to her:

"Nothing about what you have been matters with me, but there's one thing I want to ask you."

"And that?"

He eyed her a speculative moment as they sat beside her desk, the yellow light on her yellow hair.

"What was this Hilton to you?"

She colored and dropped her gaze from his, picking at a book in her lap.

"That belongs to the past," she said, "and you've just said that the past doesn't matter. I had hoped you never would want to know because it touches a spot that isn't healed yet. . . .

"There was a time," lifting her eyes to his, "when I had made up my mind to marry Dick Hilton."

He sat very quietly and his expression did not change.

"That would have been too bad, Jane," he said after a moment.

She nodded slowly in affirmation.

"I'd rather he wasn't in the country just now," he went on. "You wouldn't mind, would you, if I drove him out?"

She said quickly:

"You trust me, don't you?"

He smiled gently and looked at her with a light in his eyes that was almost humble.

"I've trusted you with my love. I want to do things for you. I'd like to drive this man out of your way."

He was reluctant to give his real reason because, by doing so, he would necessarily make her aware of the strength of the menace of which Hilton, he felt but could not prove, was a part. He still wanted to shield her from full realization of the force aligned against her.

She leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands folded.

"I wish he would go away, but I wouldn't want to see him driven. You see, there are things about me which you will never understand. Dick Hilton, for a man, was not far different from what I used to be, as a woman. Our impulses were quite similar. Since I feel that I have established my right to exist by trying to do something, to be somebody to . . . walk alone, I've come to an appreciation of the thing that I used to be, and I pity the old Jane Hunter and all her kind. In spite of all that he has been, I pity Dick Hilton, Tom, and in that very fact I see an indication of strength of which I'm proud. . . .

"You see, I like to think about myself now; that didn't used to be true.

"Last year I would have been deeply resentful toward Dick for what he has done, but now, after my natural anger has gone, I can only be sorry for him. That, I feel, is true strength.

"I am not bitter. I don't wish him harm. His environment is to blame for what he is and perhaps this country, the people he comes in contact with here, will do for him what they have done for me." Beck thought that this was an unconscious absurdity! "I begrudge him nothing. I only wish that he might come to see life as I have come to see it.

"If he could only see himself as he is! Why, he is intelligent, he has a good mind, he has been generous and kindly, and if he could only get set straight in his outlook I feel that I could call him my friend.

"Do you understand that?"

He shook his head, driving back the perplexity he felt.

"No, I don't understand that. . . . There's lots of things I'll never quite understand about you, I expect. That's one thing that made me love you; you interest me.

"I just thought maybe you'd like him out of the country."

"I can never be a dog in the manger," she replied. "What is good about this life I would share with my worst enemy, and gladly, because at one time I was my own worst enemy."

"You . . . you don't think you'd ever want to see him again, Jane?" With that evidence of natural jealousy was a gentle reproach, a woe-begone expression which, being so groundless in fact, set Jane Hunter laughing.

"Silly!" she cried, throwing her arms about him.

"Look at me and read the answer!"

Beck laughed at himself then.

"Who wouldn't want *you* all to himself!" he whispered. "And who wouldn't believe in you!"

Beck stood a long time under the stars that night, the feel of her lips still on his, but an uncomfortable doubt in his heart. He was tolerant, as mountain men are tolerant, but he had been bred in a hard school; he had learned to weigh men and to discard those who were found wanting. He was not vindictive, but he took no chances. Placing his trust in those who had showed repeatedly that they were unworthy of trust was taking a chance and though Jane Hunter had done her best to make her reasoning carry, he could not comprehend.

Finally he said: "This ain't any compliment to her, wonderin' like this. It's her way and she sure's got a right to it!"

But he went to sleep unsatisfied.

Out at Cathedral Tank that night the cattle stood snuffing rather wonderingly. Two days before there had been water which reached their knees at the deepest place; today there was none. It had trickled through the scars the blast had torn in the basin. The bellies of some were a bit shrunken from lack of it and bodies of the steers that had been killed were bloated. One, even, had already furnished food to a coyote and a pair of vultures.

Three or four licked the last of the damp silt and then turned eastward and began the slow trek back toward Devil's Hole, where at this season they had gone since they had been calves.

The Reverend saw this scattered stringing of cattle and reported it to Beck. Tom looked up from the wheel of the chuck wagon which he was repairing and considered.

"They're early," he muttered. "I hadn't figured they'd leave before the end of the week. . . . That's bad. . . ."

The next morning he and Two-Bits, the latter riding his beloved Nigger, with an extra horse carrying the tee-pee, bed and grub, clattered down the trail into the Hole and made through the brush for the Gap. They skirted the Cole

ranch, eyeing the Mexicans who were at work clearing sage brush, and a mile further on halted their horses . . . rode forward, halted again, rode forward . . . stopped.

"It's McKee," Two-Bits said. "That's Webb's gray horse."

The other rider came on and they rode forward again, Beck's holster hitched a bit forward, thumb locked in his belt.

Two-Bits had been right and when McKee recognized them he averted his face as though he would ride past without speaking. But this was not to be for Beck stopped directly in his way and said:

"Sam, if it was anybody else I'd been shootin' long ago. I ain't got the heart to kill you. You recollect, don't you, what I told you and your crowd about driftin' into our territory?"

"This ain't your range," McKee grumbled. "This is Cole's."

His gray eyes met Beck's just once and fell off, showing helpless hate in their depths, the hate of the man who would give battle but who dares not, who is outraged by forces from without and by his own weakness.

"No need to argue," Beck replied, tolerance replaced by a snap in his tone. "You drag it for your own range, McKee, and don't you stop to look back."

Two-Bits was delighted at the hot flush which swept into the other's face. He loathed McKee and to see him under the dominion of a strong man like Beck appealed to him as immensely funny.

"An' if my brother was here he'd tell you about a woman that looked back an' turned to salt," he said. "But if you turn an' look back I'll bet two-bits you turn to somethin' worse!"

The other flashed one look at him, a look of long-standing hate, devoid of a measure of the fear which he evidenced for Beck. He rode on without a word and Two-Bits laughed aloud. McKee did not even look back.

At the Gap there was water, just enough for a man and his horses for a few days. The seep had stopped and the water was not fresh.

"I guess it'll do, though," Beck said. "It's mighty important we keep this stock out of the Hole, Two-Bits. That's why I brought a trustworthy man.

"Lord, they're stringin' up fast,"—staring out on the desert where the steers slowly ate their way to the mouth of the Hole. "Funny they're out of water so soon. If they get up in here,"—gesturing back through the Gap,— "there may be hell to pay."

He helped Two-Bits pitch his tee-pee and rode away.

Throughout that day the homely cow-boy met the drifting steers and turned them eastward, past the Hole toward the lower waters of Coyote Creek. They were reluctant to go for they knew that beyond the Gap lay water but Two-Bits slapped his chaps with rein ends and whooped and chased them until the van of the procession moved on in the desired direction.

He was up late at night and awoke early in the morning, riding up the Gap to turn back those that had stolen past in the night, then stationing himself in the shade of the parapet to await the others that came in increasing numbers.

Two-Bits did not see the gray horse picking its way along the heights above him. The gray's rider saw to it that he was not exposed. Nor could he know that the animal was picketed and that a man crawled over the rocks on his belly, shoving a rifle before him until, from a point that screened him well, he could look down into the Gap.

Steers strolled up and eyed the sentinel, lifting their noses to snuff, flinging heads about now and then to dislodge flies that their flicking tails could not reach. He would ride out toward them, shoving them down around the shoulder of the point toward the east, then return to head off others that took advantage of his absence to make a steal for the Gap.

As he worked, he sang:

"Ho, I'm a jolly *cowboy*, from Texas now I *hail!*
Give me my quirt and *po-o-ony*, I'm ready for the *trail*;
I love the rolling *prairies*, they're free from care an' *strife!*
Behind a herd of *longhorns* I'll journey all my *life!*"

His voice was unmusical, unlovely, but he sang with fervor, sang as conscientiously as he worked.

As he came and went the man above watched him, his gray eyes squinting in the glare of light, following now and then the barrel of the rifle, bringing the ivory sight to bear on the man's back, caressing the trigger with his finger. A dozen times he stiffened and held his breath and the finger twitched; and each time his body relaxed quickly and he cursed softly, rolling over on his side, impatient at his indecision.

A continued flush was on his cheeks and the light in his eyes was baleful, resolved, yet the lines of his mouth were weak and indecisive. Once, when Two-Bits' raucous voice reached him, he muttered aloud and stiffened again and squeezed the stock with his trigger hand . . . then went limp.

Noon came and shadows commenced to spill into the gap from the westward. The steers that drifted up from the far reaches of wash-ribbed desert came faster, were more intent, more reluctant to be driven back. Two-Bits changed to his Nigger horse and drank from the water hole and rode yipping toward a big roan steer that advanced determinedly. The animal doubled and dodged but, shoulder against its rump, nipping viciously at the critter's back, Nigger aided his rider to success; then swung back.

Two-Bits' voice floated up as he stroked his horse's neck:

"Oh, I'm a Texas *cowboy*, lightheated, brave an' *free*,
To roam the wide *prairie* is always joy to *me*.
My trusty little *po-o-ony* is my companion *true*
O'er creeks an' hills an' *rivers* he's sure to pull me
through!"

From above a dull spat. In Two-Bits' ears an abrupt crunching as he was knocked forward and down and a dull, rending pain spread across his shoulders. He struck the ground with his face first and instinctively his hand started back toward his holster. The first movement was a whip, then became jerky, faltering, and when the fingers found the handle of his revolver they fumbled and could not close. He half raised himself on the other elbow, dragging his knees beneath his body slowly.

His mouth was filled with sand. His eyes were . . . He did not know what ailed them, but he could not see. He felt dizzy and sick. He hitched himself upward another degree, striving to close those fingers on his revolver butt. It was a Herculean task, but the only necessary action that his groggy mind could recall. He gritted the sand between his teeth in the effort. He would draw! He would fight back! He wasn't gone . . . yet . . . wasn't . . .

And then he collapsed, limp and flat on the ground, as an inert body will lie.

The fingers twitched convulsively; then were still. A stain seeped through his vest, dark in the sun. The breath slipped through his teeth slowly. The horse stood looking at him, nose low; then stepped closer and snuffed gently; looked rather resentfully at a steer trailing through the Gap unheeded, then snuffed again. . . .

Up above a man was crawling back across the hot rocks to where a gray horse waited in the sun. . . .

"I got him," he muttered feverishly as he covered the last distance at a run. "Now, by God, I'll get — . . ."

Nigger stood there, switching at the flies which alighted on him. From time to time he snuffed and stamped; occasionally he peered far up the Hole or out onto the desert almost hopefully, watching distant objects with erect ears; then the ears would droop quickly and he would chew his bit and look back at his master with helpless eyes.

Cattle strayed back from the east where Two-Bits had sent them and entered the Hole, those which had once been

driven away passing the prone figure and the watching horse on a trot, others with their noses in the air smelling water, heedless of else.

The shadows crept closer and deeper about Two-Bits. Overhead a buzzard wheeled, banking sharply, coming down lazily, then flapped upward and on. It was not yet his time!

The horse dozed fitfully, one hip slumped, waking now and then with a jerk, pricking his ears at the quiet figure as though he detected movement; then letting them droop again rather forlornly. Once he walked completely about his master, slowly, reins trailing and then stopped to nose the body gently as if to say:

"What is this, my friend? I'm only a horse and I don't understand; if I knew how to help you I would. Won't you tell me what to do? I'm waiting here just for that; to help you. But I'm only a horse . . ."

He plucked grass aimlessly and returned to stand above the man's body chewing abstractedly, stopping and holding his breath while he gazed down at the inanimate lump; then chewing again. Once he sighed deeply and the saddle creaked from the strain his inhalation put on the cinch.

For hours there had been no movement. Night stole down from the east, shrouding the desert in purple, softening the harsh distances, making them seem gentle and easy. Then from the still man came a sound, like a sigh that was choked off, and the hand which, hours before had groped haltingly for the revolver, stirred ever so slightly.

Nigger's ears went forward. He stepped gingerly about the body, keeping his fore feet close to it, swinging his hind parts in a big circle. He nickered softly, almost entreatingly, as if begging his master to speak, to make more movement; he nuzzled the body rather roughly, then stamped in impatience . . . sighed again and slumped a hip, chewing on his bit. . . .

Two-Bits was wet with dew when daylight came, but he had not stirred. The sun peered into the Gap and the drops of moisture, blinking back a brief interval, seemed to draw

into his clothing and skin; the rays licked up the damp that had gathered in the hoof prints about the figure.

Nigger lifted his head high and whinnered shrilly at nothing at all. This was another day; there might be hope!

The flies came and lighted on the crusted stain on the vest and crawled down inside the shirt . . . and after an aeon a sharp, white wire of consciousness commenced to glow in Two-Bits' blank mind. The one hand — the gun hand — twitched again and the fingers, puffed from their cramped position, stretched stiffly, resuming their struggle for the gun where it had left off yesterday.

One foot moved a trifle and a muffled cough sent a small spurt of dust from beneath the face pressed into it. Slowly the gun hand gave up its search and was still, gathering strength. The arm drew up along the man's side, the hand reached his face. Elbows pressed into the ground and with a moan Two-Bits tried to lift his body . . . tried and failed and sank back, with his face turned away from the dirt.

Nigger blew loudly and shook his whole body and stared. The other horse came up and stared, too; then moved toward the water hole, the precious water, and drank deeply. Nigger watched him as though he, too, would drink. But he did not go; remained there, with the reins dangling among the flies. Now and then his nostrils twitched and fluttered; his ears quirked in constant query.

Noon, and another effort to rise. A muttered word this time and a squinting of the eyes that was not wholly witless.

Two-Bits shifted his position. He could see his tee-pee, his black kettle on the ashes, his water bucket . . . his bucket . . . water bucket . . . water. . . . He worked his lips heavily. They were burned and cracked and his mouth was an insensate orifice. . .

After a time he commenced to crawl, moving an inch at a time, settling back, moaning. The crusted stain on his vest took on fresh life and the flies buzzed angrily when disturbed. His arms were of little use and he progressed by slow undulations of his limbs. Once he found a crack between two

rocks with a toe and shoved himself forward a foot.

"Damn . . ." he muttered in feeble triumph.

A fevered glow came into his eyes. His breath quickened under the effort. He moaned more; rested less.

And behind, beside or before him went the excited Nigger. He muttered softly, as in encouragement, doing his best to put his hope into sounds. His heavy mane and forelock fell about his eyes, giving him a disheveled appearance, but he seemed to be trying to say:

"You're alive; you're alive! You *can* move after all; you *can* move! Let me help! Oh, pardner, let me help you!"

The horse pawed the earth desperately, sending stones and dirt scattering, dust drifting.

"Keep on!" he seemed to say. "Keep it up! I'm here; we'll get there somehow!"

Two-Bits gained shadows. The water was less than a hundred feet away. He moved his head from side to side in an agony of effort and threw one hand clumsily before him. It touched sage brush and after moments of struggle he clamped his fingers about the stalk and dragged himself on, gritting his teeth against the pain. He reached a little wash and tried to rise to his feet. He could not. He floundered in effort and rolled into it, crying lowly as his torso doubled limply and he sprawled on his back.

Nigger stood at the edge, snuffing, peering down. He kicked at a fly irritably and stepped down into the wash himself, nickering in tender query.

It took a long time for Two-Bits to roll over. He cried hoarsely from the hurt of the effort and the fevered light in his eyes mounted. His mouth was no longer without sensation. It and his throat stung and smarted. Their hurt was worse than the weight of suffering on his shoulders. . . . He wanted water as only a man whose life is in the balance can want water!

Somehow he crawled out of the wash. It was fifty feet to the hole now. . . . He cut it to twenty and lay gasping,

trembling, burning, Nigger close beside him, first on one side, then the other, sometimes at his feet. Never, though, standing motionless in his path. . . .

It was ten feet. . . . Then five. Lifting eye lids was a world of effort in itself. His mouth was open, breath sucking in the dust, but he could not close it. He made a hand's breadth and stopped. His limbs twitched spasmodically and drew up. He made a straining, strangling sound, gathering all the life that remained in his body. He rose on his elbows and on one knee. He swayed forward, he scrambled drunkenly. He pitched down and as he went he made one last, awkward attempt to push his own weight along. Then fell . . . short.

The right hand half propped his body up. It slid slowly forward, impelled by the weight upon it alone, shoving light sand in its way. . . . Then went limp and extended.

The tip of his second finger just dented the surface of the water in the pool!

The horse switched his tail slowly, as if disconsolate at a waning hope.

"Hang it all," he might have thought. "Here I thought you were going to make it and you can't! I *wish* I knew how to help!"

He sighed again, this time as if in despair. He waited a long time before drinking himself as if hoping that his master would move. But the body was motionless . . . utterly. The shallow, quick come and go of breath was not in evidence. Two-Bits had done all that he could do for himself. . . .

Nigger moved to the lip of rock which held the water against the cliff. He snuffed, as if to tantalize himself and then plunged his nose into the place, guzzling greedily. Great gulps ran down his long throat, little shoots of water left his lips beside the bit and fell back. He breathed and drank and made great sounds in satisfying his thirst. He lifted his head and caught his breath and let it slip out in a sigh of satisfaction . . . drank again.

Finally he was through and stepped back, holding his lips close, as horses will whose mouth contains one more swallow. Then he stared at Two-Bits and moved close to him and chewed instinctively on the bit, letting the water that he did not need spill from his mouth. . . .

It fell squarely on the back of the man's neck, spattering on his hair, running down under his shirt, driving out the flies. . . .

Two-Bits swam back again. A strength, a pleasing chill ran through him. He moved the one arm and the fingers slid on into the water. With a choking cry he wriggled forward and thrust his face into the pool. . . . After a long time he drew back and let his fevered forehead soak, breathing more easily through his mouth.

It was nearly sunset when he rolled over, slowly, painfully, weakly, but not as a man on the edge of death. He looked up at Nigger standing beside him, nose fluttering encouragement. Just above him . stirrup swung to and fro in a short arc.

"After a while . . . a week or so, I can . . . get hold of that . . . mebby," the man said huskily.

CHAPTER XIX

AN INTERRUPTED PROPOSAL

THE love that grew in the hearts of Tom Beck and Jane Hunter was not the only suit which approached a climax in the hills. Another existed, quite different, unknown to them, unsuspected, even, but it was not a secret to one who rode from the H C ranch.

This was the Reverend Azariah Beal. He stayed on, though assuring Beck that the call might come any hour which would send him on his way. He was sent on many errands of importance, because Beck had come to believe that he could trust the clergyman as he could trust no other man and it was this riding which gave Beal his knowledge of that other love making.

Day after day he saw Dick Hilton in Devil's Hole. He saw him joined by another rider, by Bobby Cole, and knew that the Easterner spent many days at the ranch house down there in the deep valley.

Hilton treated the girl as she never had been treated before. He told her tales of cities and men and women that held her breathless and he wooed her with an artfulness which kept her unaware of love making. When with him, as when with her father, that ready defiance, her expectation of trouble, became reduced to a wistfulness, an eager inquiry which left her, not the self-sufficient bundle of passionate strength, but a simple mountain child.

He would ride beside her or sit at night by the fire in her father's cabin and talk for hours, giving of his experience well, for he was a glib talker. He asked nothing in return . . . openly, but while he talked his eyes were on her eyes,

prodding their depths, on her red mouth, hungering, on her wonderful throat, fired by desire. He bided his time, for his was a choice prize.

Now and then she talked to him of Jane Hunter and though her allusions were scornful and her face assumed that hostility, he knew that this only resulted from her envy, the curiosity which she would not let come into being. He played upon this, dropping hints of the reason for his coming west, lying insinuations of his relationships with the mistress of the big ranch, each hint a fertile seed planted in the rich soil of her imagination.

One afternoon they dismounted in a clump of willows where early in the season and in wet summers a spring bubbled under a rim rock. Now it was dry, almost dust-dry in places, and the girl sat on the grass while Hilton stretched at her feet, smoking idly.

He talked to her for long and when he paused she said, looking far away:

"I'd like to see somethin' else besides this. I'd like to have some of the chances other gals have. I'd give anything for a chance to be somebody!"

He threw away his cigarette.

"I'd give anything to give you a chance, Bobby," he said.

"Yes, but you can't!" she laughed hopelessly. "You're a gentleman and I . . . Why, I'm just the daughter of a nester."

"And maybe that very combination of circumstances gives me my chance to give you yours.

"I should like very much to take you east, Bobby."

"Yes, but there's Alf. I couldn't leave him,"—shaking her head, still innocent of his intent.

Hilton was not unprepared.

"But if he had a comfortable ranch, with good buildings and plenty of stock, and could come to visit you at times?"

"But he ain't got any of them an' besides—

"You don't mean for me to *stay*!" she said suddenly, eyes incredulous.

"To stay, Bobby. To stay with me, forever and ever."

She started to laugh but checked herself and leaned suddenly toward him, her lips parted. He lifted himself to an elbow and reached out for her hand.

"Don't you understand, dear girl? Don't you see that I love you?"

She withdrew her hand from his clasp and looked away, brows drawn toward one another a trifle. He watched her craftily, timing his urging to her realization.

"Don't you see that I came west, guided by something bigger than my own reason, directed by something that regulates the loves of men to bring them to a good end?"

She looked back at him and shook her head slowly.

"I never thought I'd be loved. I never thought you cared for me that-a way."

"Bless you! That night when I went walking into your cabin and you met me with a rifle ready I knew I would love you and that you would love me. It's one of the things neither of us can explain, but I was sure of it, sure of it. Didn't you guess? Didn't you feel it deep down in your heart?"

"No, never. Nothin' good had ever happened to me. I didn't calculate anything good ever would happen. The only bein' I ever thought I'd love was Alf and I'd go through fire for him. . . .

"But this . . . it's different. It ain't like that. This is somethin' . . . I don't know . . ."

She rose and pressed her hands to her breast as though some bursting emotion hurt her. Hilton stood before her, his breath a trifle quick, lips parted greedily. His particular hour, he felt, had struck!

"One of the reasons that has made me love you has been your devotion to your father. Another was your distrust. You never did trust me at first. I felt that you were keeping me off, holding yourself away from me, Bobby. I wanted to tell you all this long ago,"—which was the truth—"but I wanted you to be sure of yourself; I wanted you to recog-

nize love and know that this thing between us is the lasting sort"—which was a lie.

"The lasting kind?" she queried. "You love me? For good? Honest?"

"Honest!" he promised, taking both her hands. "I love you with all the love a man can give a woman! I love you enough to devote my whole life to making you happy. I have money. We can go where we please, do what we please. You will have friends and respect. You can see cities and the ocean. You can live in grand hotels and eat wonderful food that someone else has cooked; you can hear music and go to theaters; you will have flowers and automobiles; you'll see California and Florida and Europe. . . ."

"And because you love?" she demanded as he put his arms about her. "It's because you love me, ain't it? If I thought . . . if I thought it was for anything else I'd kill you." Her tone was even enough, her voice the soft, full voice of a woman touched by love, but beneath its velvet was a matter-of-fact certainty that caused the faintest tremor to run through his limbs.

They looked into one another's eyes, felt each other's breath upon their cheeks, the one consumed by passion, the other swept upward into a new world, a new, incredible life, as a beautiful hope touched her heart. They did not see their horses standing with intent ears and, as they were up wind they did not hear the slight sounds of another approaching.

"Because I love you, Bobby! Will you come?"

"And I'll be your wife and you won't be ashamed of me . . . ever?"

"Never!"—in a tone that was too firm for conviction.

"An' Alf'll come to see us whenever he wants to?"

"Whenever he wants to. Don't you believe me? Why question?"—hurriedly. "Say you love me, now, today, this hour,"—straining her to him. "Say it to me, Bobby; say that you love me as I love you!"

His eyes burned into hers and he closed his lips to press

them on hers, to touch the woman of her into being, to accomplish the end he sought.

"Oh, Mister Hilton, I—"

Her voice had the quality of a sob and he waited for her to go on before he sealed his tricky pact with a kiss, but as she choked a crashing of the brush shocked him into a realization of the outside world and a resounding voice cried:

"One moment! Just one moment!"

The Reverend Azariah Beal advanced toward them through the willows.

Bobby whirled to face him and Hilton, with an oath, released her.

For a moment, portentous silence. The Reverend halted, plainly confused. Before Hilton's glare and the girl's breathless fury his eyes wavered. He opened his lips to speak and closed them helplessly. Then a queer glimmer crossed his face, half hope, half smile.

He reached into his pocket, brought forth a fountain pen, held it up and said:

"One moment of your time to bring to your attention this article, known from coast to coast, indispensable to any man, woman or child, which we are introducing for the purposes of further advertising at a trifling price, which—"

"Who the devil sent you here?" demanded Hilton, advancing.

The Reverend lowered his hand and blinked through his spectacles.

"I do not recall that I came from that black deity," he replied mildly. "My feet are directed from Above,"—gesturing. "I have been called upon—"

"Now you're called upon to get out. Understand? Get out!"

"Brother, is it possible that you are not interested in this article? Made of pure India rubber—"

"You heard me! Get out!" cried Hilton.

For a moment the Reverend stood, as though undecided.

"I am sorry," he said, "that I can not interest you. If not today, then another time, perhaps? A splendid gift for a lady, my friend, a —"

"Nobody here wants to listen to you. Be on your way!"

Sorrowfully the Reverend replaced the pen in his pocket, rattling it against the remainder of his stock. As he turned away he drew them all out and stood for some time beside his horse, counting them carefully, muttering to himself. He looked about his feet, retraced his steps to where he had stood in his attempt to make a sale, scanning the ground.

"Can it be," he asked absently, "that I have miscounted?"

He gave no heed to the two who watched him but it was a matter of ten minutes before he was finally satisfied that there had been no loss — or that nothing else would be lost that day — and rode away.

By that time Hilton's ill temper was implacable and in Bobby's face was a half frightened, bewildered look. She turned to the Easterner with a questioning little gesture but he did not respond.

"He spoiled it for a while, Bobby," he said. "Let's ride back."

CHAPTER XX

CONCERNING SAM MC KEE

WEBB was building biscuits and Hepburn was slicing a steak from the hind quarter of a carcass that a few days before had been an H C steer. McKee entered with an armful of wood. He dropped it into the box beside the stove with a clatter and went out again. He was whistling a doleful little tune, as a preoccupied man will whistle. His gray eyes were peculiarly grim and when he stopped whistling, his mouth set into determined lines.

"What's got into him?" Webb asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"He's changed in the last day or two. Wouldn't think he was the same man," Webb went on. "Do you think there's a chance . . ."

It was unnecessary to finish the question for there was only one subject that these men discussed which called for the cautious tone which Webb had adopted. Hepburn chuckled scornfully.

"Hell, no!" he said. "Sam's the last one to double-cross us, 'specially when Beck's on th' other side.

"Somethin's got into him all right, but it ain't anything to hurt us. He's changed."

"You know how he used to be, Dad, kind of a bully, always lookin' for trouble. Well, it wasn't that he was quarrelsome like most mean men are. It was because he was afraid to be any other way. That was what made him abuse his horse that time; the pony had put a crimp in Sam an' th' only way Sam could work up his nerve to get aboard was to work him over unmerciful.

"That give Beck his chance, an' he sure did comb poor

Sam! It took all th' starch out of him, but that wasn't th' worst. It give everybody that didn't like him a chance to rub it in, an' they sure done it! Sam's been a standin' joke ever since. They seem to look for chances to ride him. Two-Bits ain't let him alone a minute when they was near together.

"Sam used to swear he'd get both Two-Bits an' Beck, but he won't. He ain't that kind, I guess. Beck knocked what little sand he had left all out of him.

"Somethin's changed him again, though . . ."

"You've rubbed it into him pretty strong yourself, Webb," Hepburn reminded.

"Different reason." Webb waxed philosophical. "When a man's enemies bother him it only drives him down; that is, a man like Sam. But when his friends ride him it's likely to put a little color in his liver. That's why I keep after him. I never did figure he'd try to get Beck in an open fight, but I used to think he might do it some other way. That's what I'd like to see him do!"—darkly.

"Maybe he will. Somethin's changed him again, Webb. I tell you he's been goin' around today like a man whose done somethin' big! It's a sort of . . . of confidence, you'd call it."

"Mebby Hilton's got under his skin. He don't like Sam but he talks a lot to him about Beck, quiet-like, as if it wasn't of much importance. Still, he keeps dingin' away at it."

"Like he does to us about things, eh? Always sort of suggestin' until you go do somethin' that seems like a good play an' then, after a while, wake up to realize that he was the one who started you on your way!"

Hilton came in and the four—the other riders were on the range—ate their meal and talked lowly of the war they waged. That is, Hepburn and Webb talked. McKee listened; neither of the others bothered to address him or even consciously include him as an auditor. . . . And Hilton listened and watched McKee, his eyes speculative.

"With th' tank gone that cuts down just so much on their range," Webb said, "an' it's plain they don't figure on usin' the Hole or they'd let their stuff drift in there as they've always done."

"You don't want to be too sure that their stuff won't get into the Hole," put in McKee with a nodding of his head.

"I s'pose they put a man in the Gap to go to sleep, did they?" Webb returned. "It was a good move on Beck's part. I wish to hell they would get by and perish of thirst. We'd keep 'em out of Cole's water, you bet! Beck's too wise to give us a chance, though."

"Mebby he ain't so wise as he thinks," McKee insisted in that queer, lofty manner. "He put a man there all right, all right, but everybody ain't been asleep."

Hepburn started to say something to Webb but was arrested by this.

"What you got in your head, Sam?" he asked, with more intent than he had used in questioning McKee in months.

Sam felt himself assuming a sudden importance at this; his manner of mystery and confidence had caught their interest and it was the first time he had so succeeded for long, the first time he had really been an insider in the game they played. It was gratifying to know facts which they did not know; he cherished this superiority, so he said:

"Never you mind what's in Sam's head. You've been figurin' I'm a helpless sort of waddie for a long time but I guess you'll think different when you find out some things I know!"

Hepburn urged again but McKee was no more responsive so the older man put McKee's secretiveness down as pique, concealing nothing of value, and went on with the talk.

Later in the evening Webb said:

"Sure you didn't leave anything by the tank that'd give us away?"

"Think I'm simple minded?" Hepburn countered.

"It's a damn good thing not to be. That's th' first place

they'll ride when th' round-up starts an' as soon as Beck hears the Tank's gone he'll go over that place himself with a fine tooth comb. If he could hang that on us it'd be all he'd need."

"He can go over it with a microscope but he'll find nothin'!"

"You sure he will?" McKee asked, rather breathlessly, his eyes lighted with a peculiar glow.

"Will what?"

"Go there to look it over?"

Hepburn snorted.

"That's one thing you can be sure about Beck: he watches details an' don't let nothin' get away from him. He's always pryin' into things himself; he ain't satisfied to get his information second hand. A thing like this, which has meant a lot to them . . . why, he'll investigate it until he's found somethin' or hell freezes!"

McKee sat back, staring at the floor, his hands limp in his lap. Still that strange light showed in his eyes and occasionally his lips moved as though he rehearsed a declaration to himself. . . . And Hilton, stretched on his bed, watched McKee.

After a time Sam roused and rolled a cigarette with fingers that were not just steady and sat smoking as he planned, already triumphing in anticipation. His eyes changed, and the lines of his face were remoulded . . . and Hilton watched.

Late that evening McKee went out into the dooryard to be alone with the memory of the one stroke he had made and to continue his plans for the master blow he was to make. But he was not alone. Hilton followed and spoke quietly over his shoulder, saying:

"Yes, Sam, the chances are that he'll go to the tank alone."

Whereupon the other started and whispered savagely:

"How'd you know I was thinkin' *that*?"

Hilton laughed lowly and put an arm across Sam's shoulders and they walked at length in the darkness, talking, talking. . . . The Easterner looked close into McKee's face and flattered and suggested and encouraged. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

“WORK AMONG THE HEATHEN”

THE chuck wagon had gone, followed by the bed wagon and the cavet, the last made up of one hundred and forty saddle horses, stringing along the road, a solid column of horse flesh. In a day the round-up would be on. Camp was to be made first far down on Coyote Creek and the country from Cathedral Tank eastward would first be ridden.

Outwardly the departure was not so different from others of its sort. There were rifles on saddles, to be sure, but there was banter and fun. Still, a spirit prevailed which told that the men were not wholly concerned with the normal business of the range. There were other things, more grim, more serious, than gathering steers and branding calves.

H C hands were not the only ones who rode heavily armed. There were others, skulking on high ridges, watching, waiting. The whole country knew they were there. The eyes of the whole country were on the factions. The ears of the country were strained to catch what sounds of clash might rise. For the coming of that clash was sensed as an impending crash of thunder will be sensed under cloud banked skies.

“I’ll be joinin’ them tonight or in the morning,” Beck told Jane as the cavalcade disappeared down creek. “I’m glad there are things to hold me here a few hours longer because I’ll be gone a long time an’ I’m jealous of the days I have to be away from you.”

“You’ll come to say good-bye?”

“If I have to crawl to you!”—as he gave her one of his lingering kisses. “When I come back from the ride there’s

something I'd like to talk over with you . . . which we ain't mentioned yet."

"I'll be waiting to talk it over, dear," she whispered, for she understood.

Not long after Beck had ridden away the Reverend stumped down from the corral to the big ranch house and rapped on the door. Jane was at her desk and looked up in surprise for it was the first time the elder Beal had ever come to her alone.

"I come to ask for aid, ma'am, in what might be termed work among the heathen, though, it is in a sense the task of a home missionary."

Jane put down her pen and sat back in her chair, trying to hide her amusement.

"Yes, Reverend," in her crisp manner—"I'm interested."

He blinked and rattled pens in a side pocket of the rusty coat.

"I trust that you will bear with me, ma'am, until I have finished. I have been moved to speak to you for long but have hesitated because it is difficult to present the matter without intruding on privacies.

"An unholy love is being hidden in the solitudes of these hills, a man who is at heart a serpent seeks to corrupt the white soul of a child. You possess a knowledge of this man which may hold the only hope of salvation for the innocent."

A feeling of apprehension swept through the girl; with it was suspicion, for though her mind easily fastened on Dick Hilton as the man referred to, she could connect him with no other woman.

"I trust, ma'am, that you will be charitable in your estimate of my works. It is no more possible for Azariah Beal to go through life with his eyes closed and his powers of deduction dormant than it is for the birds to refrain from flight or the fishes from swimming. I try to do good as I go my way. I realize that it is not in the orthodox manner, that my methods are strange; but my work is among

unusual people and the old ways of accomplishment will not produce results any more than the old standards of morality will fit the lives of my people.

"I observed this man, a stranger to the country, in town on my arrival. When I reached here to tarry with my brother until I am called to move I observed you, also a stranger to the frontier. I observed other things which you will not consider prying curiosity, I hope. There was a connection, a logical connection, between you two strangers: were it not for subsequent events this observation would have remained in my heart. So far it has, but now I must reveal it to you.

"You are the only individual who stands between Dick Hilton and the ruin of Bobby Cole!"

He stopped talking and rattled his pens again. The apprehension which had possessed Jane passed and she experienced a sharp abhorrence.

"You mean that he . . ." she began and let the question trail off.

The Reverend nodded.

"Exactly. He has charmed her. He speaks with the cunning of a serpent and she, under his influence, is as guileless as a quail.

"He cannot be driven off by threats because he is not that sort. The girl cannot be convinced of his wicked purpose because she trusts no man but him. If the affair proceeds she will pay the price of a broken heart because, in spirit, she is pure gold.

"He might protest his sincerity to men of this country and force them into belief, but with you it is different. There is in every man, no matter how far he may have fallen, a sense of shame. He can bury it deeply from those who do not know him but to his own kind it is ever near the surface.

"I beg of you, ma'am, to join me in this holy cause and dissuade him from his black purpose, if not by an appeal to honor, then by an appeal to his shame."

Jane rose.

“You mean that he has been making . . . making love to this girl? And that you think I can save her?”

“It’s the only way. She will not listen to men, she will not listen to you because she considers you her enemy. He may be so far sunk in sin that he will not heed the advice of one he has known and respected and, excuse me, loved . . . after his manner of loving.” Jane flushed but he gave no notice. “But unless I attempt to bring your influence to bear upon him I will feel that I have not answered the call to duty.”

He blinked again and looked at her with an appeal that wiped out any impression of charlatanry, of preposterousness that she might have had; he was wholly sincere.

“Why . . . I don’t know what I could say . . . what I could do.”

“Nor I. But you know Hilton; you know the girl; I have made you familiar with the situation. I rely on your resourcefulness. May I bring him to you?”

“Why, he wouldn’t come here!”

The Reverend rattled his pens and said:

“I think I might persuade him. Have I, as your employee, your permission, I might say, your *order*, to bring him here?”

“Of course. If there is anything I can do. . . . Ugh!” She shuddered and pressed a wrist against her eyes. “It’s beastly! Beastly!”

The Reverend departed and throughout the day Jane Hunter could think of little other than the situation which he had outlined to her. Her wrath was roused, replacing the disgust she had felt at first, and her heart went out to Bobby Cole with a tenderness that only woman can know for woman.

She tried to think ahead, to consider what she could say or do, to speculate on what the results of this next meeting with Dick Hilton might be.

Evening was well into dusk with the first stars pricking

through the failing daylight when two riders came through the H C gate. Dick Hilton rode first and behind him, one hand in a deep pocket of his frock coat, rode the Reverend.

"You can get down and open the gate," the Reverend said and Hilton, sulkily obeying, led his horse through.

"Now what?" he asked in surly submission.

"Now I'll finish my errand by escorting you to the owner of this establishment."

Hilton led his horse across to the dooryard. The Reverend dismounted and the two walked down the cottonwoods to the big veranda, the Easterner still in the lead, the other with his hand in his side pocket.

Jane saw them; she was at the door.

"Good evening!" said Hilton with bitterness.

"In accordance with your orders, ma'am, I persuaded this gentleman to call," said Beal, almost humbly. "I'll feed his horse and return later."

He turned and hurried up the path.

Hilton pulled down his coat sleeves irritably and looked at Jane with a bitter smile.

"To what do I owe the . . . the honor of such a summons?"

"Come in, Dick. I want to talk to you,"—keeping her voice and expression steady. She held the door open to him and he entered, his mouth drawn down in a sardonic grimace. A single shaded lamp was lighted and as she turned to him she could see his eyes glittering balefully in the semi-darkness.

"Rather different from our last meeting," he said testily. "Then you were concerned with my going; now you seem determined to have me here."

"Let's not discuss the past, Dick. I called you here for a definite purpose. Can you guess what it is?"

He eyed her in hostile speculation.

"I don't see where anything that concerns me could concern you now. That is, unless you've changed your mind."

She gave him a wry smile and a shake of her head.

"I shall never change, Dick. It was no interest in you that made me send for you. It was interest in the well-being of another woman."

"Oh, another woman! And who, pray, may she be?"—frigidly, face darkening.

"Can't you guess? Have there been so many out here?"

"You know there's only one woman for me," he said bitterly, "and she drove me off like a thief and has called me back as though I were a thief!"

"Perhaps you are."

"What do you mean by that?"

There was that about him which made her think of a man cornered.

"I have called you here because I have reason to believe that you are trying to steal the heart of a young girl—of Bobby Cole."

He laughed unpleasantly, but there was in the laugh a queer relief, as though he had anticipated other things.

"Now who's been tattling to you?"

"My men have seen you come and go, they have seen you with the girl. One of them came to me and begged that I send for you and try to talk you out of this. They know, Dick. These men understand men . . . like you."

"Because they see me with her and because I'm not considered fit by you to stay beneath your roof, even when it is night and storming, they think I'm damned beyond hope, do they? They think I'm menacing her happiness, do they?"

"But aren't you?" she countered. "I know her. I have talked to her and watched her. Dick, she is a lonely, pathetic little creature with the world against her. There have been just two things left in her life: her own splendid self respect and her devotion to her father. Why, she hasn't even had the respect of the people about her!"

"And now she is facing loss of the biggest thing she possesses: the loss of her belief in herself, for you will destroy that just as surely as you force her to listen to your

. . . to what I suppose you still call your love-making."

He eyed her a moment before saying:

"You used, at least, to be fair, Jane; you used to go slowly in judging people and their motives and usually you were more or less right. Have you put all that behind you? Does the fact that a man is charged with some irregularity convince you of his guilt now?"

"Why no. But knowing you and knowing her . . ."

"Don't you think it possible for a man, even, for the sake of the argument, a blackguard like me,"—bowing slightly—"to change a trifle?"

He put the question with so much confidence, with so much of his old certainty that it checked Jane.

"Why, we all may change," she said slowly.

"I am glad you will grant that much,"—ironically. "Think back, just a few weeks, and you may recall one somewhat theatrical statement you made to me about finding yourself among these people. I thought it preposterous then but I have lived and learned; I know now that you could mean what you said then. . . . Jane, I, too, have found my people . . . at least my woman."

She stared hard at him.

"Do you mean that, Dick Hilton?"—very lowly.

"As much as I have ever meant anything in my life!"

"Sit down," she said, more to give her time to think than in consideration of his comfort. Then, after a moment: "It isn't much of a boast, to mean this as much as you have ever meant anything."

"Then need we talk further? You ask questions; I answer; you do not believe. Why continue?"

She sat down in a chair before him.

"This is the reason: That I think you have lied to me again. I don't believe you are sincere. No, no, you must listen to me, now!"—as he started forward with an enraged exclamation. "I brought you here to make what is left of the Dick Hilton I once liked see this thing as I see it."

And try she did. She talked rapidly, almost hurriedly, carried along by her own conviction, made dominant by it, sweeping aside his early protests, forcing him to listen to her. She put her best into that effort for as he sat there with his cruel, cynical smile on her she realized that this was a task worthy of her best mettle.

She sketched Bobby Cole's life as she knew it, she argued in detail to show him how the girl had never had a chance to taste the things which are sweetest to girlhood. She touched on the incident in town where, in desperation, Bobby had tried to force the respect of men and she told him of the defiance with which her own advances of friendship had been met.

Jane was eloquent. For the better part of an hour she talked steadily, occasionally interrupted by a skeptical laugh or a sneering retort, but she persisted. Hilton listened and watched, eyes hard, mouth drawn into forbidding lines, a manner of suspicious caution about him, as though there were much that he wanted to conceal.

Finally her sincerity had an effect and she could see his cold assurance melting. His gaze left hers and a flush crept into his cheeks. She moved quickly to sit beside him.

"Dick! Dick! For the sake of what you once were, for the sake of what you still can be, go away! If you won't go for the sake of the girl, go for your own salvation!"

"It's not what you think," he protested feebly, without looking at her. "I'm not philandering. I—"

"No, Dick, not philandering, because that is too gentle a word. It is something worse, something darker, which will bring more shame to you and to all who once knew and trusted you.

"Don't you see that you're playing with something as delicate as a mountain flower? Don't you see you will crush it? Because this girl is strong of body and thoroughly able to contend for her own position with muscles and weapons, don't think that her heart can be treated roughly. It would

wither if she gave it to you and found that you held it of little value."

"I tell you I'm on the level with her."

"Would you marry her?"—leaning closer to him as his manner told of the effect her pleas were having.

"Of course."

"You'd take her east, to your friends?"

"Why, why not?"—shifting uneasily.

"Dick, look at me!" Tears in her eyes, she put her hands on his shoulders and forced him to turn his face. "You can't mean that? I can see you don't. Dick, oh, Dick! For the sake of all that is good and fine in life, for the sake of the manhood you can regain, don't do this thing!"

"I'm asking it of you. Perhaps I have little right to make any requests of you but in the name of the love you say you once bore for me try to look into my, a woman's heart, and see what this thing means. I'm not trying to make it difficult for you; I'm not trying to interfere and be mean. I'm begging you, Dick, to give her up and if nothing else will appeal to you, do it for my sake!"

She shook him gently as he turned his head from her, humiliated, shamed, beaten. He was convinced: she knew that his sham was broken down, that his purpose was clear to her and the conscience that remained in his soul tortured him.

Jane held so a long moment, fingers gripping his shoulders, appeal in every tense line of her body.

And close outside the window another figure held tense, watching, holding breath in futile attempt to catch the low words they spoke. It was a slender figure and had ridden up on a soft-stepping horse, dismounted, slipped over the fence, ran stealthily along the creek, halted in the shadow of the cottonwoods and then crept slowly forward until it stood close to the shaft of yellow light which streamed from the window. There it stood spying. . . .

"You have said that you loved me, Dick. Do this for me in the name of that love! I am asking it with a sincerity

that was never in any other request I have made of you.”

She shook him again and slowly he turned his face to hers, showing an expression of weakness, of helplessness, as one who turns to ask humbly, almost desperately for aid.

The figure out there started forward as though it would leap through the window, making a sharp sound of breath hissing through teeth, in fright or in hatred. The movement was checked, for the gate creaked open, the scuffling boots of a man were heard on the path. The figure skulked swiftly along the house, ducking along the cottonwoods, out toward the road where a horse stood waiting.

It was the Reverend coming and he whistled “*Yield not to Temptation*,” as he neared the house, as if to give warning of his approach. Hilton heard and looked up sharply and a glitter of rage appeared in his eyes. He shook Jane Hunter off savagely and rose.

“I’d let you make an ass of me!” he cried savagely. “You won’t believe when I tell you the truth. . . .

“But what the devil should I care?” he broke off shortly. “Whatever I do and where and why is my own affair; none of yours, though you try to make it yours, try to judge me as you judge your own, new friends, probably.

“You talk of the man I once was. Well, if I’ve changed in your eyes, it is not my fault; it’s yours, Jane Hunter, yours! You’d drive me on, lead me on, and when finally cornered you’d be perfectly frank to tell me that you’d only toyed with me, that you tolerated me because you thought you might have to use the things I owned!”

“Not that, Dick! You’re putting it all wrong. . . .”

“Listen to me!” he shouted, quivering with rage. “If I’ve changed it is you who have changed me! If life means nothing to me, it is you who have made it so!” He was towering in his anger and, seeking to shift responsibility for his own rottenness to the shoulders of the woman before him, he aroused a sense of injury and genuine indignation. “You played me as your last straw as long as you dared and now, by God, when I go my way, the only way open t

me, when I try to redeem a little happiness, you hound me, try to shame me with your sham morals!"

"Dick, that's not true."

"It is true. Why, you haven't a leg to stand on, you —"

His storming was interrupted by a rap on the door and he turned to see the Reverend standing there, battered derby in his hands.

"Excuse me," he said mildly, "but the gentleman's horse is fed."

It was his way of letting Jane Hunter — and Dick Hilton — know that she was not alone; but if the Reverend had intended to stop the tirade which he had heard from outside he did not succeed for the Easterner was further enraged at sight of him.

"I suppose this is part of your plan!" he snapped. "You found out that it's no use to wheedle me, so you've had your gun-man come to drive me off as he brought me!"

"Dick, don't be silly! You're absurd. A gun. The idea!"

Hilton laughed tauntingly and said:

"He's standing there now, covering me with a gun! Look at him." He pointed to the Reverend's pocket. A hand was in it and the garment bulged sharply as though a revolver, concealed there, was ready for instant use. "That's how you treat me; that's how you got me here. God knows I wouldn't have come otherwise if your existence depended on it.

"This man met me on the trail. He said you wanted to see me. I consigned him to the Hell from which he tries to have sinners and he covered me from his pocket just as he has me covered now and said it would be wise for me to answer your summons.

"How else do you think he brought me?" he demanded, wheeling to face Jane again.

The girl looked quickly to Beal, lips parted in surprise.

"I sent Mr. Beal for you, yes, but I said nothing about

using force to bring you. I wouldn't do that. I'm sure there is some mistake."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sure there is," said the Reverend, blinking and withdrawing his hand slowly. "I'm a man of peace. I'm not a man of force."

He lifted his hand clear, the ominous bulge in his pocket giving way, and held up one of his pens.

"One dollar," he said rather weakly . . . as though frightened, or vastly amused.

Standing there, looking rather blankly about, holding that pen in his hand he was in ludicrous contrast to the furious Hilton. It made the other man seem absurd, his raging like the burlesque of some clowning actor.

With a helpless, choking oath Hilton turned, livid with rage, and strode for the doorway.

"For the last time I've been made a fool of!" he cried, and hastened up the path.

They heard him mount his horse and ride away.

Jane was too busied with more somber thoughts to appreciate the humor of the situation; she did later. Even had she been able to give attention to the contrast between Hilton's rage and the chagrin which followed so closely, the change in the Reverend would have diverted her attention. He stood looking at her with grief in his eyes and when he spoke his voice shook.

"I feel that I have done my duty, ma'am, but that is all Azariah Beal has to say for himself. There has been no result. I may have been too late in my attempt. Surely, there is nothing more to be done. . . .

"Nothing more, unless you may succeed in ridding yourself of your enemies."

"Do you think that would have an effect on Bobby Cole?"

He nodded gravely.

"You and she have something in common: an enemy."

"He has been here tonight? You mean that Hilton is

my enemy in the sense that he may imperil the future of the H C?"

"The same, ma'am."

"Reverend, it is likely that you are right. I am beginning to see a connection between factors which have seemed to be unrelated."

He started to speak but a shout checked him. They listened to a confusion of voices.

"Something's wrong," Beal said and stepped to the veranda. "Why . . . somebody's hurt!"

Jane ran to the doorway but he had already started up the path. She followed as she saw a close huddle of men about the lighted doorway of the bunk house move slowly in, carrying a burden gently and as she neared the building a rather tragic quiet marked the group.

Nigger, Two-Bits' horse, was standing saddled in the path of light. Inside a man was lying face down on the floor. The Reverend knelt beside him, leaning forward, and others stood close, silent and grave.

The prostrate man was Two-Bits and his shoulders dripped blood. As Jane became a part of the group he stirred and struggled to raise his head.

"What is it, brother?" Azariah asked gently, turning Two-Bits over and supporting his head. "Tell us. You're not done for. It's ripped your back open, but that's all. Who was it?"

The other looked about slowly with bewildered eyes.

"From behind," he said weakly. "They got me from behind. . . ." His gaze wavered from face to face and finally rested on Jane's. He moved feebly.

"A big bunch of your cattle must be in th' Hole, ma'am," he said. "There ain't . . . any water there. . . . I was keepin' 'em . . . out . . . an' somebody got me from behind. . . . They must of waited . . . to get me . . . from behind. . . . And the only water's . . . in fence. . . ."

"It looks like . . . a lot of trouble, ma'am. . . ."

He stopped talking, exhausted.

CHAPTER XXII

RENUNCIATION

IT looked like trouble and there was trouble.

Beck, with the Reverend, Curtis and two of the ranch hands preceded Jane to the Hole at dawn and when she rode down the trail she saw them on their horses, forming a little group well away from the nester's cabin.

Her cattle were there and the fenced area was fringed with them as they moved back and forth, sniffing at the water they wanted, which they needed and which, though just on the other side of the wire strands, might as well have been days away. Inside the fence grazed Cole's herd with plenty to eat and drink.

Tom's face was troubled as he rode to meet the girl.

"It's serious," he said. "There's enough of your stock down here to ruin you, ma'am, unless we get 'em out to water."

"Let's take them out, then!"

He shook his head skeptically.

"They're in bad shape. They're crazy wild and we haven't got enough men here to shove 'em up the trail. It's an awful job with quiet cattle because they have to go in single file and there's no drivin' 'em. I don't dare risk taking these through the Gap and around to water the other way. Why, Jane, that's forty miles!"

"It'll be another day before we can get the boys back to help get 'em out and it looks like a heavy loss at best unless we get water. There's only one way to get it and that's to persuade Cole or his daughter that we'd ought to have it."

"They must have water!" she cried. "It's inhuman not to give it to them!" She watched a big steer going past at a rapid walk, eyes bright and protruding as in fright; he

bawled hoarsely for drink. "Why, Tom, people can't refuse water to beasts that need it.

"See! There's Cole and Bobby now,"—pointing toward the cabin. "Come. I'll buy water if necessary."

She spurred her horse and Beck followed at a gallop. When he came abreast he looked curiously at her face. Her jaw was tight and her eyes dark with determination. This was her fight and she was thoroughly aroused to it. She asked no advice, she showed no hesitation; she went forward with all confidence, certain that in this cause which involved not only the loss of property but the suffering of dumb creatures she could have her way.

A hundred yards from the cabin a steer thrust his head through the wire strands and shoved, heedless of barbs, tantalized by the smell of water. Cole shouted with his weak voice and picked up a stick and ran toward the animal, brandishing his cudgel.

Bobby stood watching the riders approach.

"I've come to see you again," Jane said in brief preface. "This time it is an urgent matter." She dismounted and faced the other girl. "My cattle are here and they need drink very badly. You have all the water. Will you let them through your fence? As soon as they can be moved we will take them out and they will bother you no more."

Bobby eyed her with loathing but it was not as she had been on their previous encounter, for about her manner was something more concrete, as though she cherished a definite grudge this time.

"Is your memory so bad that you don't recollect what I told you before?" she asked slowly. "I told you once to keep away from us; I tell you that again. This is our range now; your stock ain't got any rights here."

"I'll grant you that I have no right to ask. I did what I could to keep my cattle out of here. The man I set to guard the Gap was shot down; that is why they are here this morning; that is why I must have your water, because it is the only water available.

"I am willing to pay. This means very much to me. Won't you name a price, give me water? I am asking it as a favor and will be willing to pay for that favor."

"Favor!"

The girl shot the word out harshly.

"Favor! You're a sweet one to come askin' *me* for a favor!"

A fever of rage rose in her face and her brows gathered threateningly.

"Nothin' we've got is for sale to you! I wouldn't help you if I could save your outfit by liftin' my hand . . . an' if I was starvin' for that you'd give me in pay!"

Jane was nonplussed. Bobby's breast rose and fell quickly and her white teeth gleamed behind drawn lips. She was the catamount, ready to fight!

"But think of these cattle! They're suffering—"

"Cattle! You ask me to think of cattle because they're suffering and you'd make human beings suffer from worse things than thirst!"

"I don't understand you. What have I done that would make people suffer?"

"I s'pose you don't know?"—jeeringly. "I s'pose you don't *want* to know in front of him,"—with a flirt of her quirt to indicate Beck. "I wouldn't either if I was in your place, you—sneak!"

"Sneak?" Jane repeated, stung to open resentment. "Sneak?"

"Yes, sneak. You'd run us out of this country if you could, but you can't. You'd take my man if you could . . . but you can't!"—through shut teeth.

"Your man?"—looking at the girl and then at Beck in bewilderment. "Your—"

"Yes, my man! Oh, don't think I don't know. I saw it all. I saw one of your hands take him to your home last night. I followed him, I watched through your window. I seen you beg with him and plead with him. I know what you want. . . .

"Why, he's told me everything, from th' first! You got him to follow you out here, you got mad at him and threw him out of your house once. Now you want him back. You want him back. I suppose while he,"—tilting her head toward Tom—"is away on round-up! You want him back when you've got everything you want and he's all I got, all I ever had!"

Tears sprang into her eyes and her voice came trembling through trembling lips. Jane, swept by confusion, sought words and found none. It was preposterous! And yet the very accusation degraded her. Drawn into a quarrel over a man, and such a man!

"You'd take this claim, if you could, when you've got more land than anybody around here. You'd take my man when you've got lots of others yourself. You *must* have lots like you got lots of other things. Maybe you think that by takin' him you can drive me out and get the claim that way. Maybe that's your reason, you . . . you . . ." She seemed to search in vain for an expletive that would convey her contempt.

"But you misunderstand! You're all wrong."

"Wrong, am I? Wrong, when you put your arms around his neck and put your face close to his an' make him look at you an' beg him to do things for your sake. I watched through your window last night. I heard those words, 'For my sake.' You said 'em. I suppose that's wrong, is it? I—"

"But it wasn't that! It wasn't what you think it—"

"I s'pose you thought he wouldn't tell me, but he did. He won't come back to you. You couldn't get him away from me!"—in triumph.

Her manner was so assured, she was so convinced of the truth of Hilton's version of last night's encounter that Jane Hunter was at a loss for argument. Impulsively she turned to look at Beck, as for suggestion, and what she saw there stripped her of ability to fight back. His face was as devoid of expression as a countenance can be, but his eyes chal-

lenged, accused, bore down upon her, demanding that she explain!

He *demand*ed that she explain!

He suspected her! He gave credence to Bobby's accusation. He could do that!

A word, even a gesture, would have cleared the situation but his look struck her inarticulate, immobile. She had been so confident of herself, of his trust; and now he had grasped upon this monstrous charge and held her to answer.

"You with your fine notions, your money, your city ways!" the other taunted. "You, with all you've got, would take the only thing I've got, the only thing I've ever had!

"An' now you come, askin' favors. Favors from me! Why, all I'll do for you is to run you out of this country. I've heard what they call me here: the catamount. I'll show you how the catamount can scratch and bite!"

It swept over Jane that she must reply, that she must say some word in her defense, that she must say it now . . . now . . . that in this second of time her fate swung in balance, that bitter though explanation might be she must make it, for Beck was listening, Beck was watching, Beck was doubting!

And, as she would have spoken, lamely, but with enough clarity to absolve her from suspicion, Bobby stepped closer.

"You take your men an' light out!" she snapped. "You keep your men out of here an' your cattle away from this fence. Th' first steer that breaks through 'll get shot down, th' first man that tries to help 'em through will find that he needs help himself. I hate you!" she cried. "I hate you worse 'n I hate a snake an' I'll treat you like a snake from now on.

"You carry that idea home with you an' you carry this . . . as first payment, to bind the bargain!"

With a quick, sharp swing of her arm, she whipped her quirt through the air and it wrapped about Jane's soft throat with a vicious snap.

She stepped back with a choking cry, hiding her face. She heard Beck's short, "That'll do!" in a strange, unnatural voice, as though his throat were dry. She heard the Catamount's contemptuous sniff and her hard, "Clear out!"

She found herself in her saddle again, riding beside Beck as they moved toward the other H C riders, who, dismounted and seated on the ground, had not witnessed the dramatic parley and its humiliating climax. She was confronted by a situation which clearly spelled disaster for her ranch unless solved and solved quickly but that did not matter now.

She had been whipped, as the man who had insulted Bobby Cole had been whipped. Had been drawn into a brawl! And, far worse, she had found that the man toward whom she had toiled from the Jane Hunter that had been to the Jane Hunter she had one day dreamed she might be, had doubted her!

He was talking haltingly, something about bringing more men to shove the cattle up into the Coyote Creek country, but even through her confusion she realized that his thoughts were not finding words, that he was forcing himself to talk of those things. Her heart wanted to cry out, to tell him that he had misunderstood, that her encounter with Hilton was not occasioned by the motive Bobby Cole had suspected. The old Jane Hunter would have done so, but with her new strength had come another thing, until that hour hidden: it was pride, a pride which was as noble as her love, which would permit no cavail, which would not stoop to conquer!

She fought it down, striving for clarified thought, feeling for the word, the brief sentence which would explain away Beck's suspicion and leave that pride uninjured, for there must be such a way. And while she fought, blinded by tears and confused by humiliation, the moment of opportunity passed. Beck left her.

They were with the others, who grouped about her foreman, and he said:

"I was going to send one of you men to bring a dozen of the boys from the wagon to help save this stuff, if we can,

but I've changed my mind,"—with a bitter significance which they did not catch. "I'm goin' myself. Curtis, you're in charge. Keep your head. Keep the cattle from breakin' his fence because they'll shoot 'em down an' if they start shooting cattle there'll be a lot of us get shot."

He started away at a gallop without so much as a look at Jane. Impulsively she called his name and spurred her sorrel after him. He set his horse on his haunches, wheeled and waited for her, face white, those eyes so dark, so accusing. That look checked the words that were on her lips as effectively as a blow on the mouth and he spoke first as she halted beside him:

"You did send for him, I take it? You didn't deny that."

He was hard, cruel, brows gathered, and the storm within him stung that pride of hers further, roused it to newer life.

"Yes, I sent for him," she managed to say, "but Tom, won't —"

"That's all that's necessary then," he said, and was gone.

She sat on her horse watching him ride across the flat for the steep trail that led out of the Hole and she felt that all the sweetness, all the worth-while quality of her life was riding hard behind that straight figure. A bitterness rose in her heart, a rebellion. He would not listen to her and she had tried to speak!

Jane did not consider that this was but one evidence of the greatness of the love of such a man, of the sacredness with which he treasured it; all she saw was the distrust, unbelief, and after a time she rode slowly on, watching him become a fleck on the face of the mountain, seeing him finally disappear over the rim, out of her life, it seemed.

With leaden heart she entered her house and sat heavily in the chair before the desk. An envelope was there, addressed to her in Beck's coarse hand. She tore it open with unsteady fingers.

The little gold locket which had been warmed first by

her heart, then by Beck's, which had been her talisman for months, slipped into her palm. With tear-dimmed eyes she looked at it and then turned to the letter, reading:

"It is likely that you need your luck worse than I do so I am returning your gift. I would go away from your outfit now but if I did they would say that they drove me out as they have said they would do. My reputation is all I have left now and I would like to keep that because a man must have something.

"I did not want to love you in the first place as you may recall but I guess I was pretty weak for a man. I told you once that there were things I did not understand about you and I guess the way you think about men is one of them. I wanted to drive him out of the country and you would not let me. I waited a long time today for you to deny what the Cole girl said and you did not do it. I was pretty mad when I left you but I realize now it is all my fault. I took a chance which is not the way to do and now I am paying for it. Well, I am able to pay.

"I hope you will not answer this and will not try to talk to me again unless on business. I do not blame you. I blame myself but I do not want to talk about it. I will take good care of your cattle and your men because that is my job. I will run these men out of this country and then if I am able to resign I will.

"Respectfully,

"TOM BECK."

She put down the letter, feeling queerly numb. She experienced no particular resentment because she could well see how her failure to speak at the proper moment had condemned her in Beck's eyes; her sensation was of one who has failed in a crisis. Bobby Cole had dominated her, had swept her off her feet, had given her that depressing feeling of inferiority again and before her lover's eyes; it had shaken her assurance, made her question the strength of

which she had been so certain in the last weeks! It was that which hurt her far more than the stinging welt about her throat where the lash had bitten her flesh.

She inquired for Two-Bits, learning that the doctor had left him with the assurance that his recovery would not be unduly delayed. She ate her dinner abstractedly. In all she did she moved as one who is only partly alive; a portion of her body, even, seemed insensate, while her mind was dead. A dull ache pervaded her, an emptiness, for something vastly important was gone and she was without resource to call it back.

The Reverend came and went, taking beds on pack horses and when Jane saw him departing she laughed rather weakly to herself.

It was so simple! There was the agency which could bridge this chasm and while so doing could save the pride which was creating the conflict within her.

The Reverend knew her motive in sending for Hilton. He could and would make Beck aware of what had transpired. She even thought of writing Tom a note, something as follows:

"I am terribly hurt but in a way it is of my own doing. I have just one thing to request: Ask the Reverend how Dick Hilton came to be here."

But she had no one to send with it and Beck would be back on the morrow with the men to move the thirst tortured cattle. Besides, there must be another way than the despatch of such a message. That was too cold and formal. It would bring him humbly to her but she knew how he would suffer when his pride was hurt; and such a thing would do no less than hurt his pride. She would make it as easy as possible.

A let-down came and she cried and when she slept that night her dreams were not distressing.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE REVEREND'S STRATEGY

THROUGHOUT the day the sun beat into the cañon, its heat relieved by rare breezes of brief duration. What wind did come raised swirls of dust and rustled wilted foliage, for the country had become ash dry.

The cattle, most of them on their fourth waterless day, bawled dismally, a thirsty chorus rising as the day aged. They did not eat; they wandered rapidly about seeking moisture. Those spots of the creek bed which showed damp above and below Cole's fence were tramped to powder by uneasy hoofs and a narrow area outside the fence was cut to fluff by the restless wanderings of the suffering steers.

As afternoon came on they abandoned their futile search for unguarded drink and clung closer to the wire barrier, snuffing loudly as their nostrils drank in the smell of water as greedily as their throats would have swallowed the fluid itself. Their eyes became wider, wilder, and the bawling was without cessation. Flanks pumped the hot air into their bodies in rapid tempo and slaver hung from loose chops. The herd was in desperate condition.

Now and then a big beefer would rush the fence as if to tear his way through but the new wire and solid posts always flung them back. Again, another would push his head tentatively between the strands and attempt entrance by gentler methods, but always they were driven back either by one of the H C riders or by Cole himself.

By the time the sun was half way to the horizon the steers were moving in a compact mass back and forth along the fence, snuffing, crying, sobbing in dry throats, bodies growing more gaunt hourly as frenzy added its toll to physical suffering.

The bawling became a din. Big steers shook their heads and hooked at one another groggily. The first one went down and could not rise alone; the men "tailed" him up and worked him to shade, where he sank to his side again, panting, drooling and silent.

"Damn an outfit like that!" growled Curtis, looking across the bunch to Cole, who stood staring back.

"There's goin' to be hell a-poppin' here," commented one of the men. "They're waitin' for trouble an' you can't prevent 'em havin' it —"

"Look at that!"

A half dozen steers, surging against the fence, put their combined weight on a panel and the post gave with a snap.

Bobby ran forward, brandishing a club, and drove them back as they floundered in the sagging wire, heedless of barbs, eyes protruding with want of the drink that dilated nostrils told them was near.

After he had propped the post up again the nester shook his fist at Curtis and shouted:

"I'll protect my property! You can protect yourn if you will. Th' next critter that breaks my fence gits lead in his carcass!"

He slouched back to the cabin and came out a moment later with a rifle. Seating himself on a stump he crossed his knees and with the weapon across his lap sat waiting.

"We'll bunch 'em so we can make a show at holdin' 'em tonight," Curtis said. "That'll save time in th' mornin' . . . an' we'll need all our time."

Forthwith he and the others began gathering the suffering stragglers in a loose bunch.

The Reverend came riding across the flat before this was completed. His face was serious and as he came close to the herd and saw the condition of the cattle he shook his head apprehensively.

"I fear, brother, that by another day there'll be little strength in those bodies to get 'em up to open water," he said to Curtis.

"It'll be the devil's own job for sure! It'll take twenty men to move 'em and if we don't lose half we'll be lucky.

"If that old cuss 'uld let 'em water once it'd be a cinch, but he's a bad *hombre*; he won't. There's something back of this, Reverend."

Beal scratched his chin and blinked and looked across to where Cole sat. One of his Mexicans also was armed and had taken up his position further down the fence.

"So it would appear," he replied. "As Joshua said to Moses, 'There's a noise of war in the camp.'

"I see a relationship between the smiting of my beloved brother and the refusal of this outfit to grant water.

"Oh, another watcher!"

He indicated Pat Webb who evidently had gained the Cole ranch by a circuitous route and had taken up his position within the fence, armed with a rifle.

Night came on with a dry wind in the trees on the heights. Its draft did not reach the Hole but the sound did and that uneasy, distant roar served to intensify the distress of the cattle.

Beds were made on a knoll not far from the bunched steers and the Reverend was the first to rest, while the others, singing, whistling, slapping chaps with quirts rode round and round the herd keeping them away from the fence to give the riflemen no opportunity to shoot. Azariah did not sleep but rolled uneasily on his tarp watching the bright, dry stars, muttering to himself now and then.

Once he got up and fussed about his blankets and Curtis, riding by, stopped.

"No, I can't rest," the Reverend replied to his query. "I believe I have lost one pen. . . ."

"By the way, brother, if these were your cattle how many head would you give just to get them to water tonight?"

"I'd give several," Curtis answered bitterly. "Yes, I'd give a good many and look at it as a good investment. Without water we're goin' to make lots of feed for buzzards an' coyotes, tryin' to make up that trail tomorrow!"

"A good many. . . . A good many," the clergyman muttered as Curtis rode on. "She is for peace, but when she speaks, they are for war," he paraphrased the Psalm.

"They that war against thee shall be as nothing.' . . . An investment . . . a good investment. . . ."

He sat hunched on his bed for some time, whispering over and over. . . . "A good investment . . . investment. . . ."

Then suddenly he rose and pawed about him for a dried bough of cedar which he had cast aside to make his bed. With trembling fingers he sought a match, struck and applied it.

The flame licked up the tinder and burst into a brilliant torch. The bawling of the cattle cut off sharply. Whites of terrified eyes showed for an instant and then vanished as heads were quickly turned away.

The herd stirred, like a concentrated mass, body crowding body; it swayed forward, a rumbling of hoofs arose. And from the far side came the shrill yipping of horsemen as they broke into a gallop and sought to set the cattle milling.

Futile effort! Driven mad by thirst it would have required a much less conspicuous disturbance than that flare of fire to start the wild rush. With a roll of hoofs, a sickening, overwhelming sound, heads down, crowded together into a knitted body of frightened strength the bunch was in full stampede!

Down the far side rode Curtis, high in his stirrups, his revolver spitting fire into the air. A big white steer charged straight at his horse like a blinded thing and the animal carried his rider to momentary safety with a hand's breath to spare.

On another flank of the herd another rider charged in and shouted and shot and swung off. There was no time; there was no room! It was less than a hundred yards to the fence and to be caught between its stout strands and those charging heads meant terrible death. Curtis' warning cry cut in above the fury of the flight as he doubled back toward safety.

Within the fence were shouts. Figures sprang to outline in the darkness. The first steer's shoulders struck the wire, the fence held, threw him back and then, driven forward again by oncoming numbers the creature went through, torn and raw, through a torn and tangled barrier. There was a creaking strain of wire for rods, a snapping of stout posts and then orange stabs out of the night. . . . Two . . . four . . . five, and the sound of rifle shots pricked through the background of heavier sounds.

A steer bawled once, its voice pitched high, and went down. Another dropped beneath mincing hoofs without a sound. From their path ran the riflemen, desperate in their fright, heedless of damage done property or rights. Over, under and through the fence went the cattle, pouring across the cleared land, crowding, snorting, gaining momentum with each stride. On across the flat, on down the steep bank of the creek, on into the water that sloshed about their knees. . . .

And there, as quickly as it had come, their panic departed, for the need of that water dissipated their fright. Noise of the flight subsided and into the night rose the greedy sound of their guzzling as the water which Cole had fenced and sought to hold was gulped down the parched throats of H C cattle.

Curtis rode up at a gallop, drawing his horse to such a quick stop that his hoofs scattered dirt over Azariah.

"What th' hell?" he began.

"I found it!" cried the Reverend in exultation, holding up a fountain pen. "Must have dropped out when I took off my coat—"

"But look what you've done!" cried the other. "They knocked four steers dead as the Populist party!"

Azariah looked up at him, the shrewdness in his face covered by darkness, but his voice was guile itself.

"A small investment, brother, a good investment. Perhaps a parable is writ this night. . . . A pillar of fire, a smiting of the rock?"

Curtis whistled lowly.

"Reverend, you planned it all out?"

"It is not given to me to plan; I am guided by the spirit of righteousness! Besides, those who lack wisdom are the only ones who divulge their innermost thoughts, brother. I found a way out of Egypt for the cattle, as 't were. Remember, brother, the way of the Lord is strength!"

They had not heard Bobby Cole running through the brush toward them but as the Reverend stopped she stepped between him and Oliver's horse.

"So that's it!" she hissed. "So you're th' one to blame! I'll tell you what I told your boss this mornin', that I'll run you out of the country if it's th' last thing I do, you Bible talkin' rat!"

"This ain't th' first thing I've got against you,"—darkly. "I might 've forgot th' other because she was to blame for it, but I've heard what you just said an' I won't forget this! And don't think I'm th' only one who'll keep it in mind!"

"Why, you'll be run out of this country like a snake 'uld be chased out of a cabin! Remember that!"

For a moment she stood confronting him in the darkness and though features were not clearly distinguishable they could see by the poise of her figure that those were no idle threats. Then she went as quickly as she had come, leaving the Reverend scratching his chin and Curtis whistling softly to himself.

"A woman possessed of the devil!" said Beal softly.

"Yeah. Or three or four," commented the other.

"Yesterday I sought to save her soul and tomorrow I must seek to save my own skin!"

There was no more shooting because H C cattle were mingled with Cole's. Curtis parlayed with the nester who made whining threats of a suit for damages. When Curtis returned to the beds for the remainder of the night the Reverend was not there.

"Dragged it for the ranch!" he chuckled.

So he thought. The Reverend had dragged it, but not for the H C or any other nearby stopping place. Though Beal did not know all that transpired to bring about the ruin of Jane Hunter he knew enough to realize that he had made one determined enemy that night, that to make one was to make many and that Bobby Cole's inference that he had plunged himself into disfavor with others was no empty warning. Azariah Beal was not a coward but he was discreet. The risk of remaining was not justified by the end he might serve and now he sought sanctuary in distance.

Tom Beck led the riders from the wagon into the Hole at dawn. Gathering and moving the refreshed cattle up the trail was a difficult task but it was accomplished without further loss, a fact which satisfied the men. They reached the ranch on their way back to the round-up camp in late afternoon.

News of the saving stampede had been carried ahead and Jane realized that one difficulty had been surmounted and that the financial ruin which confronted her yesterday was no more. However, removal of that distraction allowed her mind to concentrate on the greater difficulty: the breach which separated her from Tom Beck. Only one way seemed open: to prevail upon the Reverend to explain matters, and that way was closed when a passing cow-boy delivered her a note, written hastily on rough paper. She read:

"The call has come and my feet are turned toward a far country.

"My arm has been lifted for you; though I am no longer in your presence my prayers will continue to be lifted in your behalf.

"Respy.,

"A. BEAL."

Azariah had served the H C well. But for his strategy

she might even then be suffering from a loss which would doom the ranch. And yet he could have served her infinitely better by staying on, by untangling the snarl which circumstances had made in her affairs.

There was just one remaining course to follow, she told herself. This was to go to Tom and explain everything. Then up rose her pride and made denial. She could not do that! If his love would not bear up under doubt, then she must keep her pride intact, for that was all she possessed. Torn between desire to fling herself upon him and sob out the whole story and to maintain her stand until he should be proven wrong and come to her contrite, she dallied with the decision until the riders had come and gone.

She watched Beck, riding at a trot down the road, looking neither to the right nor left. She could not know that a similar struggle tortured him. "Turn back!" one voice in his heart commanded. "Seek her out and question and question until you know why; if it is the worst, if she has been hiding a secret affection from you, beg her to turn from it, to come to you; offer her your all, your pride, your life if need be. She is all that living holds for you!"

And then that other, sterner self, which said over and over: "That cannot be! If there is that in her heart which must be hidden from you, draw back now and save all that is left to you: your pride!"

So pride held the one in her house and it led the other down Coyote Creek, and each mile, each hour put between them multiplied the difficulties, wore down the chance of reconciliation. For by such simple, basic conflicts are loves ruined!

CHAPTER XXIV

BECK'S DEPARTURE

NIGHT had come upon the round-up camp, fires near the cook wagon were dying. On the rise to the southward the night-hawk sat with an eye on the saddle stock which grazed over a wide area and in their tee-pees the men were sleeping, preparatory to the first day's riding.

Tom Beck sat alone by the glowing remnants of the cook's fire, staring stolidly into the coals, mouth set, struggling with his pride. That quiet, inner voice continued its insistence that he yield a trifle, give Jane Hunter one more chance. "What?" it asked, "will you gain by denying her this? What, indeed, will be left for you if you persist?"

But the voice was weaker than it had been early that day. The alternative it raised in his consciousness less appealing, and a determination to smother it grew steadily. He had been crossed; he had been duped!

Oh, he had been a fool! he told himself. He had thrown to the winds his caution and his reserve; he had taken the biggest chance that life, the trickster, dangles before men. He had taken it blindly, against his better judgment; it left him embittered, with nothing beyond except the position which he held among men. That was a mawkish attainment now; it was so cheap and inconsequential compared to the sense of accomplishment which had been his when Jane Hunter had thrown herself into his arms and begged that he carry her into his life! Deluded though he may have been, that moment had opened to him sensations, vistas, that he had never before imagined existed.

And now! All else that remained was gray and dead.

He had been lifted up to see what might be, only to find that it was denied him; more, those moments of glory had taken the zest from the life that had been his before and that now remained.

For long he sat there and gradually the inner voice died entirely, slowly a cold, heartless desire to cling to a dead thing like his standing in the country took its place as his chief interest in life. He had written Jane that such was all that remained to him. He had not realized as he scrawled those words what a pitiful bauble it was but now it was necessary to endow it with values that he could not truly feel. But he forced himself to believe it of consequence, for men like Tom Beck must have some one valuable thing to live for.

The tee-pees were quiet when he arose, dropped his dead cigarette into the expiring embers and sought his bed. But in one tee-pee a man looked out at the faint jingle of spurs. It was Riley who, with others from the lower country, was riding with the H C wagon to help the larger outfit and, in turn, to be helped in his branding. He was bunked with Jimmy Oliver and Oliver said:

"What's he doin'?"

"Turnin' in."

Riley settled back in his blankets and muttered:

"It's funny . . . damned funny, Jim."

"He's like a man that's *through*. Didn't appear to have any real interest in the work today, seems like he don't give a damn. I don't understand it."

"If it wasn't Tom Beck I'd say that they'd got his goat. It's hard to believe of him."

"It can't be that." Oliver was loyal. "It's somethin' else, but it seems like somethin' worse than a man bein' sick of his job. Still, he said twice today that he wouldn't be here long an' the way he said *long* made me think it'd be a mighty short time."

Silence for a time.

"Mebby," said Riley, "it's her."

"Mebby you're right," the other replied. "Tom didn't used to give a damn whether school kept or not. Then, after she come he changed, got to takin' things seriously and anybody could see he was gone on her. Now. . . .

"Well, he ain't afraid of men. There ain't bad men enough in this country to drive Tom Beck out. . . . But women. . . . They'll put a crimp in th' best of us!"

It was the following evening that news of the destruction of Cathedral Tank was brought to Tom Beck. Riley had ridden the far circle himself and had found no cattle at the waterhole which the H C foreman had visited only a few days before. That is, no live cattle. He found four steer carcasses, already ravaged by coyotes and buzzards, found the fresh gash in the rock basin and had ridden back to help those cowboys who were no shorter circles, holding explanation of the fact that he returned empty handed until he could give it first to Beck.

Tom received the news silently.

"I expect you can fix up the basin with some concrete so it'll hold next winter," Riley said.

"It's likely," the other responded, "but next winter's plans for this outfit ain't worryin' me, Riley."

He meant, of course, that there were matters of greater importance just then. The dynamiting had been accomplished after his warning to Webb and Hepburn, which was clear evidence that the war went on as desperately as before and that these other men were not cowed, their determination to run him from the country had not been shaken. A hot rage swept through him. Next winter's plans were remote indeed! Fate had taken his woman from him; these renegades would take away the last hold on life!

But Riley did not construe his meaning as such and when, the following morning, Tom called Jimmy Oliver aside and talked to him the misunderstanding of what went on in his mind was more complicated for he said:

"Jimmy, you're goin' to lead this round-up for a while . . . mebbly for good."

"So, Tom?"—in surprise, and in hope that an explanation would be forthcoming.

"I'm leavin' here an' mebbly I won't be back."

Beck was thinking that he would inspect that tank and track down the men responsible for its destruction and make them pay. He said that he might not be back because he had warned them away from H C property and could expect no leniency if he invaded their stronghold. Invade it he would, for this had gone past the point where he could play a waiting game. So long as it had been his safety which mattered most he could assume and retain the defensive, but now Two-Bits had all but lost his life while executing his orders and H C cattle had been driven by hundreds into high country before he had planned they should come. It was time to counter-attack.

Rapidly the word ran through the camp: Beck was leaving! As it passed from man to man it grew, as rumors all will, and took more definite shape: Beck was quitting.

He ate silently with the others and his very silence was so marked that it quieted the rest, warded off the questions which under other circumstances might have been put to him.

The wrangler brought in the horses and Beck was the first to approach the cavet with rope ready. He selected his big roan, looked the animal over carefully and slinging a canteen over the horn, climbed rather heavily to the saddle.

Other men were catching up their horses. One was pitching and fighting the rope; two others were trying desperately to break out of the cavet. There was running about and confusion, but as Beck rode away to the west-way, head down, so obviously absorbed in himself, men stopped to watch and to wonder.

The H C foreman was not the only individual in that

country who, as the sun shoved over the far rim of the world, thought so intensely of his own, wholly personal interests that consciousness of what transpired about him was lost.

Jane Hunter sat suddenly up in her bed, golden hair in a shower about her shoulders, blue eyes that had been waking and painful until dawn, filled with tears. She stared about her as one will who rouses abruptly from a startling dream, lips parted, a hand to her flushed throat, breath quick and irregular. She held so a moment, then sank back into the pillows, calling softly:

"Tom; Tom!"

Her slender body quivered spasmodically and her sobbing became like that of a child. One hand, flung across the cover, clenched feebly and feebly beat the bedding, as though it hammered hopelessly at walls which held her in, making her a prisoner . . . as she was, a prisoner to her pride.

And high up on the point which formed the western flank of the Gap to Devil's Hole, Sam McKee dropped down from his gray horse and stood looking far out across the level country beneath him. In the clear air he could see the smoke of the round-up camp fire.

Yesterday he had watched from there, with Hilton's words still in his ears, Hilton's hope in his heart, and had known that Riley rode to the tank. Last night he had talked and walked in the darkness with the Easterner again, had heard Hilton's crafty questioning of Hepburn and Webb which caused them to repeat again and again their belief that Tom Beck would take it upon himself to inspect the damage done by dynamite. He had slept fitfully, in a fever of anticipation.

And yet he had kept secret his achievement in shooting down Two-Bits. There was a time for all things and the time to divulge that minor accomplishment was not yet. For long he had been belittled, and had no standing among his associates; now they were banded in common cause,

he had made one step toward triumph and that move had re-established the confidence that had lain dormant for long. It had enabled Hilton's suggestions to take hold, enabled him to whet his own hate, to work himself into a paroxysm of rage, and today he was to emerge a figure of consequence, for he was to remove the obstacle which was in the path of all.

Webb's battered field glasses were slung over his shoulder and as he picked out the lone dot of moving life, coming slowly in his direction, he unstrapped the case with hands that trembled. It required but one moment to identify that horse for none but Beck's roan swung along with the same distance-eating shack; but McKee stared for a long interval, his body tense, his breath slow and audible, as if tantalizing himself by sight of that isolated rider, teasing his hatred, teasing it. . . .

Then he mounted the gray and swung down the treacherous point, seeking a big wash that made a wrinkle on in the floor of the desert where storm waters had rushed toward the tank for countless decades. In this he could ride unseen and he went forward at a trot, eyes straight ahead, moistening his lips from time to time. . . .

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE SHADOW

THE outcropping which formed Cathedral Tank stood stark and saffron in the lap of the desert under the morning sun, flinging out slow waves of heat even at that early hour, as Sam McKee rode from the wash into the basin and stopped his horse.

Since the mountains themselves were made that group of pinnacles and ledges had jutted up from the seamed desert, a landmark for miles around, catching the flood waters that rushed toward it from far hills.

The name of the tank was result of no far-fetched imaginings for the granite rose in long, slender spires, as though the thirsty desert reached great fingers toward the sky in stiff appeal. Narrow defiles struck back into the granite and sharp crevices cut deeply down between the natural minarets, and at one place a larger opening led backward into the rocks, widened and narrowed again, forming the rough outlines of transept and nave. More, the wind which always blew there often sounded deep notes as of an organ when it wandered through narrow spaces.

On three sides this abrupt, ragged rise of rock shut in the basin and the other was open to the waters that swept down from the south and eastward. When McKee neared this entrance he stopped his horse and reconnoitered. The other rider was not in sight, lost in some of the many depressions of the valley and many miles yonder, for the gray horse had traveled a shorter distance and that at a trot. The roan could not arrive for some time. . . . So he reasoned. . . .

The man stopped his horse at the edge of the fresh, deep

scar which Hepburn's explosive had made. Other tracks were there, made by Riley yesterday. Across the way lay the dead steers and overhead a buzzard wheeled slowly, waiting to return to the feast from which he had been frightened by Sam's approach.

"Bone dry!" the man said aloud, and laughed.

Then he drank from his canteen and wiped his lips with a long sigh, either in satisfaction or anticipation, and then looked about; not absently, but with plan and craft.

To that point Beck would come, there he would stand, and behind was a ledge on the face of the towering rock, higher than a mounted man's head, deep and with enough backward pitch to conceal thoroughly a man's body. It would be a hard scramble, but he could gain it by aid of a tough stub which grew on the wall. Once there he would be protected.

McKee rode close under this ledge and stood in his saddle, lips parted and eyes alight. He could hold off a regiment there; what chance would one unsuspecting man have? As he stood so he unstrapped his gun and lay it with its belt on the shelf.

He dropped down and rode into a nearby, narrow crevice, where his horse could remain concealed, dismounted, and took down his rope, preparatory to tying the animal.

He believed his growing haste was only anticipation, but perhaps there was a quality of premonition there. He had been unable to follow Beck's progress and remain concealed himself; therefore he had not seen the roan pick up his swinging trot as Tom's concentrated thought reached ferment and he sought relief in speed.

McKee reached for the reins to lead his horse further into the crevice. Then his heart leaped and he went quickly cold as he looked at the animal.

The gray's head was up, ears stiff, eyes alert as a horse will pose on sensing the approach of another animal. Even as Sam's hands flashed out for his nose the nostrils fluttered and had he been an instant later a betraying whinner would have gone echoing through the rocks to warn Beck.

He drove his fingers into the soft muzzle and choked back the sound. The gray stepped quickly and shook his head whereat McKee relaxed his grasp somewhat. They then stood quiet, both listening, the horse alert, the man weak and white, breathing in fluttering gasps.

He was trapped! Outside on the ledge where he had planned to wait and shoot Beck down without giving or taking a chance, lay his gun. On either side the walls rose sheer, without so much as a hand-hold for yards above his head; before was a blank wall; outside was Tom Beck. And fear of a degree such as the man had never known shook his body.

It was that fear which is as dangerous to an enemy as the most absurd courage. Discovery would mean catastrophe; he had nothing to gain by shirking now!

Slowly he released his grip on the gray's nostrils, holding ready to clamp down again should the horse attempt to greet the other. He heard hoofs clatter on the rock basin, knew that Beck had stopped. Then the wind soughed through the rocks with its prolonged organ tone and for the moment McKee could only guess what happened out there.

The gray, with head turned, stared toward the opening of the crevice and then as no other sounds came, swung his head back to its normal position and switched rather languidly at flies.

Carefully McKee stole toward the entrance of the crevice where he might see the other man. He went with a hand against the granite, putting down his boots very carefully, hoping against hope that Beck would be far enough away so that he might either recover his gun or devise some means of escape. Perspiration ran from beneath his hat band and his hands were clammy cold. His breath continued in that fluttering gasp.

Beck had dismounted and was squatted beside the scar in the rocks. His roan stood a dozen feet behind him. McKee peered out, measuring the distance quickly. The

other's back was to him but there was no chance that he could regain his gun without being detected. Beck's revolver swung from his hip, and McKee had nothing with which to fight but the rope in his hands. . . .

The rope! He stared down at it and drew back behind the boulder of rock. The rope!

An absurd, impotent device, but it had served purposes as desperate as this! Besides . . . there was a hope in it and, for McKee, there was no other hope beneath that blue dome of sky. . . .

He looked out again as he built his loop. Beck was on hands and knees, peering down into the crack through which stored waters had trickled away. Sam made the loop quickly, steeled to caution. He moved out from his hiding place a step . . . then another. The roan looked up, with a little whiff of breath and Beck, attracted by the movement, the slight noise, turned his head sharply toward the horse.

It was then that the loop swirled and that McKee sped forward a dozen paces as quickly, as quietly as a cat, balanced, sure of himself in that crisis. From the tail of his eye Beck saw the first loop cut the corner of his range of vision and his body made the first lunge toward an erect position as the lithe writhing thing sped through the air. . . .

McKee had never thrown as true. The loop settled about Tom's arms and beneath his knees. It came taut with an angry rip through the hondou even as the snared man made the first move to throw it off. He was pitched violently forward on his face, arms pinned to his sides, legs doubled against his stomach.

The breath went from him in an angry oath of surprise as McKee's breath shot from his lips in another oath . . . of triumph. Hand over hand he went down the rope, keeping it taut, yet hastening to reach the doubled body before Beck could wriggle free. He fell upon the other just as one arm worked slack enough to permit the hand to strain for the revolver at his hip.

Snarling, gibbering with a mingling of terror and rage, McKee's one hand fastened on the gun. He clung to the rope with the other, battering Beck, who struggled to rise, back to earth with his knees. His fingers clamped on the grip of the Colt; he pulled free: it flashed in the air as his thumb sought the hammer and then, as he drove the muzzle downward against its living target the man beneath him bowed and writhed and he went over with a cry. A fist struck his wrist, the revolver exploded in the air and fell clattering, a dozen feet away.

Then it was man to man, a fight of bone and muscle . . . bone, muscle and rope. Blindly McKee clung to the strand with one hand. It passed about his body as they rolled over. Beck's own weight, struggling to tear from it, tightened its hold. Tom struck savagely at the face beside him with his one free fist but McKee's knees, jamming into his stomach, crushed breath from him.

For one vibrant instant their strength was matched, the one's physical advantage offset by the handicap of the lariat about him. And then the rope told. Slowly Tom's resistance became less, gradually McKee wound the hemp about his own hand and wrist, shutting down its sinuous grasp, drawing Beck's body into a more compact knot. With a desperate shift he was on top, winding the hard-twist about Tom's hands, trussing them tightly behind his back, licking his lips as he made his victim secure.

In that time neither had spoken nor did McKee utter a sound as he rose, wiped the dust and sweat from his eyes and surveyed the figure at his feet. Beck looked back at him, the rage in his eyes giving way to a sane calculation. At the cost of great effort he rolled over and propped himself on one elbow. A scratch on his forehead sent a trickle of blood into one eye and he shook his head to be rid of it, coughing slightly as he did so.

"Now," he said, his panting becoming less noticeable, "what do you think you're goin' to do?"

McKee laughed sharply and looked away. He walked

to where the revolver lay in the sharp sunlight, picked it up, broke it, examined the cartridges and closed it again.

"I come out here to kill you, Beck; that's what I'm goin' to do next."

He did not lift his voice but about his manner was a defined swagger, the boasting of the craven who, for once, is beyond fear of retribution. A slow shadow crossed between them as the buzzard wheeled, waiting, lazily impatient. . . .

Beck delayed a brief interval before asking:

"Right here, Sam? You going to kill me right here?"

"Right here, you—!" He spat out the unforgiveable epithet with a curl to his lip. For once he had this man where he wanted him; Beck's life was in his hands . . . right in his *palm*. . . . "I'm goin' to kill you like I'd kill a snake! I've took a lot off you; I've stood for a lot from you, but you've gone too fur, you've played your hand too high!"

He began to feel a greater sense of his importance. He was dominating and it was sweet.

"I've waited a long time, Beck; I ain't forgot a thing you've done to me; I've been waitin' for just this chance!

"Now I'm goin' to kill you, you—!"

Again the word, with even great conviction. The man's lips trembled with rage, but as he glared down at the other he saw the level, mocking eyes studying his. He had not yet impressed Tom Beck, had not made him fear! It was disconcerting.

"What you goin' to kill me with, Sam?"

"With your own gun, by God!"—spinning the cylinder.

A moment of silence while Sam looked at the dull barrel, a queer, quick hesitancy coming over him, something he did not understand, something he did not will. When, a moment before, he felt that the situation would take a course exactly as he willed!

"With my own gun!" Beck repeated.

McKee cocked the weapon and looked about.

"When you goin' to do this killing, Sam?"

The level, mocking tone infuriated the other.

"Now!" he cried, shaken by hate. "Now, by God!"

He screamed the curse, threw the gun up to position and glared into Beck's face, moving forward a step, standing poised as though he would shoot and then fling himself upon his victim to vent his festering rage with his fists.

But he had failed to reckon throughout on one fact: The human eye is a stronger weapon than the inventive genius of man has ever devised, and he was meeting the gaze from an eye that was as steady, as fearless, as collected as any he had ever seen. His courage was the courage bred of cowardly impulses and it could not stand before fearlessness. . . .

"Right now, Sam?"

The question was low, gentle, and with another shade of inflection might have been a plea. But it was no plea. It was subtle, stinging mockery which penetrated McKee's understanding and gave full life to that desire to hesitate which had shaken him a moment before.

"You ain't goin' to kill me right off, are you Sam?"

And at that McKee's irresolution became full blown. His body swung backward from its menacing poise, the gun hand dropped just a degree; his gaze, an instant before fixed and red with hate, now wavered.

"No, you ain't going to kill me now, Sam. You ain't got the guts!"

Prostrate, bound, wholly helpless, miles from aid, Beck flung those words from his lips. They pelted on McKee's ears like hard flung stones and he looked back to see the eyes that a moment ago had been amused, blazing righteous wrath.

"You wouldn't kill anybody, McKee," Beck said, after a breathless pause. In that pause McKee's gun hand had gone to his side and as it went down so did the flare of rage in Beck's face. His eyes grew calm and steady again with that covert amusement in them.

"You ain't just that kind of a man. If you'd been goin'

to kill me you'd have done it right off. You wouldn't have waited, like you're waitin' now. . . . You missed out on your intentions, Sam, when you didn't do it *pronto*."

Across McKee's face swept a wave of helpless rage, humiliation, shame, self revulsion. . . . He stood there unable to move. He wanted to kill with a lust that men seldom feel, but he could not for he knew that he was a coward, knew that Beck knew, and the assurance that it was within his physical power to take a life without risk to his own mattered not at all. The moral force was lacking.

He tried to meet Beck's gaze and hold it but he could not. That man, even now, did not fear him, and to a man who had been impelled to every strong act by fear, fearlessness is of itself an overwhelming force.

Tom talked on, lowly, confidently. He chided, he made fun of his captor; he belittled himself, discussed his inability to defend himself, but time after time he said with emphasis:

"You're afraid of me, Sam."

Afraid of him! Yes, McKee was fear-filled. He could not kill and yet thought of the retribution that might come for going even this far put him in a panic. There were others who would kill. Webb would have done it, Hepburn might have . . . there was one other who would have killed . . . Hilton, but *he* could not and the others were far off. They would know, they would ridicule him and thought of that, coming so close on that high expectation of triumph that had sent him out onto the desert, made his position hopeless.

He turned and walked slowly toward the ledge which was to have been his assassin's hiding place.

"Goin' to leave me, Sam?" Beck asked.

"You'll see what I'm goin' to do?" McKee raved, wheeling, suddenly articulate. "You'll see what'll happen to you, you —! What's already happened is only a starter. I didn't intend to kill you myself. I only come here to hog-tie you. I guess I done that, didn't I?"

"Ain't you just sure, Sam?"

The tone was stinging and where McKee might have raved on he simply grasped the stub on the rock and scrambled up until he could reach his revolver.

Beck asked if that was McKee's arsenal; wanted to know more about Sam's plans; wanted to know who sent him; wanted to know if any one else was coming or if they were going out to meet others. . . . He talked gently, slowly, tauntingly until McKee fidgetted like an embarrassed school girl.

After a time Beck struggled to a sitting position, back against a rock. The searing sun beat down on his bared head, his wrists were puffing, fingers numb and swollen from the ropes cutting into his flesh. His body ached miserably, but he would not betray that. His throat burned for water and there was water on his saddle, but he would not mention thirst. There yet was danger! He must keep the other impressed with his inferiority. . . .

"That your pet buzzard, Sam?" he asked once, squinting upward at the wheeling scavenger. "Somebody said you kept one . . . to pick up after you. . . ."

"You wait! You'll have less to say after a while," McKee growled and stared off toward the heights to the eastward, feigning expectancy.

And then, as McKee paced back and forth, covering his helplessness and his fear to make another move, by the sham of watching for other arrivals, Beck's mind began working on a theory. Two-Bits had been shot down the day he had driven McKee off H C range. He had been shot from behind. McKee was the only one in the country who had a personal quarrel with the homely cowboy.

It was clear enough to him but he feared that an accusation, bringing some demonstration of guilt, might bring other things that he dared not risk. He played a game that was desperate enough. He lived by the grace of McKee's cowardice and that cowardice had permitted this triumph by the scantest possible margin. To provoke the

desperation that he knew was latent in Sam's heart would be the rankest folly.

Noon, with blistering heat. McKee drank greedily, water running down his chin and spattering over his boots. It was agony for Beck but he fought against betraying evidence of it, holding his eyes on the other and smiling a trifle and wondering how long he could keep back the groans.

McKee squatted in the shade of a rock for a time. Once he looked at Beck while Tom was staring across the desert and that hate flickered up in his eyes again; then Tom looked back and he got up and walked, licking his lips.

Two o'clock: "I don't guess they're comin' today, Sam. Maybe you misunderstood 'em."

Three: "Sure is too bad to have your plans all go to hell, isn't it, Sam?"

The sensation had entirely gone from hands and lower arms. His biceps and shoulders ached as though they had been mauled; his back was shot with hot stabs of pain.

But at four o'clock he said: "You'd ought to have killed me, Sam. That'd surprised 'em for sure!"

He bit his lips to hold back the moan and for a time things swam. He hoped that he would not lose consciousness . . . hoped this rather vaguely, for vaguely he felt that McKee would kill him should he be unable to realize what transpired. He had a confused notion that Jane Hunter was there and this disturbed him. He felt a poorly defined sinking sensation. . . . Jane . . . and this. Why, then this really mattered very little! That his life was in danger, that his body hurt, were inconsequential details compared to the love that had died yesterday, to the hurt of his heart!

A draft of cooler air, sucking through the rocks, roused him and he looked up to find that the tank was entirely in shadows. The rocks were still hot but the air which moved above them was heavier, cooler. McKee paced nervously back and forth. He wore two guns.

"You reckon somebody's goin' to steal me?" Beck asked, forcing his voice to be steady. "I didn't realize I was valuable enough to be close herded by a two-gun man."

With the moderation of temperature Tom's alertness revived.

"I'm goin' to sleep right here, Sam; where are you going to turn in?" he asked. "I sleep pretty well in th' open; how about you?"

He leaned forward slightly and his eye had a brighter glint. Question after question he flung at the other. Now and then McKee growled; twice he cursed Beck, in vile explosions of oaths. At these Beck nodded in assent.

"I sure am an undesirable," he said.

Back and forth, bewildered, McKee walked. He dared not face the future with Beck alive; he dared not take Beck's life. He feared the punishment that might be his for this much he had done; he feared the relentless ridicule of Webb and Hepburn and of Hilton; he feared to go, he feared to stay. And gradually this last fear grew.

"I think you ought to start out an' ride after 'em, Sam," Beck advised. "Do they *sabe* this country? You better go; they might get strayed. I'll be here. I figure on stayin' quite a time. I . . . Honest, Sam, I've had a hell of a good time today. . . ."

McKee wheeled in his walking.

"You'll stay all right!" he screamed. "You damned bet your dirty skin you won't go far! You've been talkin' a lot wiser than you know, you —! You'll stay!"

He dropped to his knees beside Tom and with a wrench pulled off the man's boots.

The movement sent exquisite pains through Tom's body, but he shut his teeth against them. He smiled, demonstrating more of the Spartan by that smile than he had at any time during the day.

"You ain't figuring on walkin' your boots out, are you?" he asked in mock solicitation.

"Never you mind, you —!" McKee snarled.

He brought out his horse, tightened the cinch and led him toward the roan. He tied Tom's boots to his own saddle and then without looking at the man he had come to kill and who he was leaving bound, waterless, without boots or a horse, twenty miles from the first help, he lashed the roan with his quirt, sharply about the head and, when the big creature wheeled in surprise, about the hocks.

Kicking, frightened, stepping on the reins and breaking them off, Beck's horse ran away. Ran scot free, head up, out to the eastward, abused and headed for home. He began to buck, pitching desperately. The saddle worked back and under and down. He kicked it free. Somewhere between the tank and that fallen saddle, Beck knew was his canteen. But McKee did not know. He mounted and stuck into the wash through which he had ridden hours before, lashing the gray to a gallop, putting distance between his menace, his shame. . . .

And back in the tank as night came on a man for whom every move was torment rolled and wriggled from place to place, searching doggedly for a ragged rock, among those that were water-worn and smooth.

The buzzard had ceased his wheeling, the stars came out. Beck talked aloud rather crazily. Everything seemed smooth; even the pain became less harsh; everything was soft and easy . . . remarkably so. . . . Until his cheek felt a ragged, narrow edge of rock, close in against the base of the tallest spire. Moaning feebly he wriggled against it until the ropes touched the edge. Then, with great labor, he began to writhe and twist. It took hours to fray out a single strand, and his arms were bound by many . . . hours. . . .

And when finally his arms fell apart, sensations, fiendish, killing sensations, began to stab through them, he laughed lightly and ended shortly. He was free! . . .

Free?

Just at that time back in the H C ranch house a woman

rose from her tumbled bed and dressed. Her eyes were dry though her breath came unevenly.

She looked into her mirror as she put on her hat.

"You're a fool!" she cried lowly. "A fool! . . . False pride has taken two days out of your life . . . two precious days!"

She ran down the stairs, out to the corral and saddled her sorrel horse.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MOUNTAIN PORTIA

IT was a long ride from the H C to the round-up camp but the sorrel was not spared. The impulse that sent Jane Hunter through the last hours of darkness had only accumulated strength before the resistance which had held it back through those dragging days. She was on her way to her lover, to explain in a word the situation that had caused the breach between them; she had fought down the pride of which that resistance was made and now her every thought, her every want was to make Beck know that it was humiliation and injured pride rather than infidelity which had sent him away.

Thought that she had failed to stand self possessed before Bobby Cole — a burning, shaming thought yesterday — was relegated to an obscure place in her consciousness. She had fallen short of the poise her lover would have her retain, but that did not matter . . . not now.

Without Beck's love there was nothing for her, she had come to believe and she experienced a strange, little-girl feeling, fleeing toward the protecting arms that could comfort and hold her safe from the blackness that was elsewhere.

She leaned low on the sorrel's neck and called to him and he ran through the dying night breathing excitedly as her impatience was communicated to him. Dawn yawned in the east and the mountains took shape. The road became discernable before her. She drew the excited horse down to a trot and forced herself to force him to conserve some of his splendid energy. . . . Then urged him forward, a moment later, at a stretching run. . . .

The round-up camp was moving that day. The riders were up and the first had swung off for the work of the morning before she pulled her horse to a stop beside the chuck wagon.

"He ain't here, ma'am," Oliver replied to her query for Beck.

"Not here?"—sharply, for she sensed from him that something was wrong.

"No. He left yesterday. He told me to head this ride. He—"

"And where did he go?" she broke in, voice not just steady.

"I don't know, ma'am." The man studied her face intently, seeing the confusion there, adding it to the evidence he had collected to piece out a theory. "I thought maybe he said something to you about quitting."

"*Quitting!* You don't mean that!"

"It looks like it, ma'am. I didn't know just how to take what he said. It seems like somethin' 's got him worried. He wasn't like himself. You wouldn't know him.

"He said that future plans for this outfit didn't interest him. He said he was leavin' and it wasn't likely he'd be back but it wasn't so much what he said as it was th' way he said it that made me think he was goin' to drift. We all know he's got some pretty active enemies but it wasn't like Beck to run away from 'em. Still. . . .

"He left me in charge an' said I was to take orders from you. He ain't showed up since and Lord knows where he'd go except out of the country."

Out of the country! The words made her hear but vaguely the story of the ruined Tank and the questions about the work that Oliver put to her. Out of the country! He had gone, then, thinking that her love had not been a fast love, that she was wholly unworthy. He had taken his chance and had lost and that loss had taken from him even the desire to stay and face the men who would drive him out of the country because he had defended her!

Later Jane found herself riding homeward, the sorrel at a walk, her mind numb and heavy. Last night it had been a question of love against her pride; she had sacrificed the latter only to find that that sacrifice had been made too late.

She wanted, suddenly, to quit . . . to quit trying . . . thinking. . . .

She canvased the situation: she was alone, without an understanding individual upon whom to lean. She was the target for great forces of evil which sought to undermine her very determination to exist in that country. A faint wave of resentment made itself felt at that. They would continue their war and upon a lone woman! She realized her position more keenly than she had before, when Beck had been shielding her. Now she stood unprotected. If she were to exist she *must stand alone!*

Her mind went back to that time when Dick Hilton had told her that she could not stand alone and her resentment became a degree more pronounced.

The lethargy, the hopelessness clung but behind it was something else, a realization that she had not lost utterly. She had lost the love she had found, but had she failed to gain anything? Yesterday it seemed that the ripest fruits of experience were hers; she had position — menaced, but still hers — she had love. Months before she had abandoned the quest of love, seeking only to stand alone. She might go back to her outlook of those days, put aside the call of her heart and seek only for place; she could make that search intelligently now!

She sat at her desk, a spirit of resignation coming as a sort of comfort. If she had lost love, had she lost all that there was in life? No, not that! There was something else she had found in these months: She had found *herself!*

Tom Beck was gone, his love for her was dead, miles were between them, and she believed she knew him well enough to understand that he had put her forever behind him. She had lost the true fulfillment of life, perhaps, but

something remained. And the question came: Why not make the best of it? Why not keep what remains? Why not fight for it? Why not *stand alone*?

Oh, she had not known the strength that had been born of Beck's resistance to her wooing! That morning she believed that she could quit, that she could drift aimlessly, buffeted by vagrant influences, but now she knew that she could not. A compelling force had been started within her which would not down, a driving impulse to keep on, to salvage her self respect, to wrest from life what remained.

And in this she recognized that quality which Beck had planted in her, which he had nourished and coaxed and made to grow. To keep on would be rite offered at the shrine of her love for him . . . though he was gone. . . .

For a moment she cried and after that hope was born. He might return; she might even follow and make him understand. She set that back, resolutely. Tom Beck was gone from her life, she told herself, but his influence remained. That could never go; by error she had lost final achievement: love. By error she had been thrown back upon herself, her own resources, her own will.

The war that was waged upon her had been a terrifying thing yesterday; now it was even more horrible for it sought to take from her the last thing that remained to be desired, and that could not be!

She wiped her eyes angrily and repeated aloud:

"That cannot *be*!"

She must fight on alone; fight harder than she ever had fought in her life before. It was up to her, now, to remain fast in the face of efforts to dislodge her.

Jane paced the floor nervously, in quick, swinging strides. There was the burning of hay, the breaking of ditches; there was the shooting down of Two-Bits, the destruction of Cathedral Tank, there was the presence in the Hole of the nester and his daughter. At thought of Bobby a sharp pang shot through her. There was a woman who could dominate! There, perhaps, was the key to the puzzle.

Beck had intimated that her enemies found a nucleus in the nester's outfit; the Reverend had been outspoken in his suspicion; she had confided in Riley that she suspected something of the sort. Cole himself was a negligible quantity but the girl was not. The catamount might hold Jane Hunter's fate in her hand . . . the hand that had struck her!

On her desk lay the envelope in which had been Beck's note; beside it the locket. She paused, picked up the trinket and studied it as it lay on her small palm. Slowly she lifted it to her lips, clutched it tightly and then with a catch of breath fastened it about her neck, where it nestled as though coming home again.

She needed her luck, he had written! Oh yes, she needed her luck!

And even then a rider was speeding across the hills toward her, lashing his horse, crashing through brush, leaping down timber, clattering over treacherous ledges to save time: and other men were riding on Jimmy Oliver's orders, bringing the cow-boys in off their circles, assembling them in Devil's Hole where a group of men stood silent and sullen. . . .

Oh, she would fight on, desperate in her determination to crowd thought of a lost love from her life! She welcomed combat for it would be as a balm to that gaping wound of loss.

Later she saw the rider come into the ranch on his lathered horse. He flung off at the bunk house and, a moment later, came running toward her with Curtis at his side.

Alarmed, Jane met them at the door with a query on her lips.

"They want you in the Hole, ma'am," Curtis said.

"What's the trouble?"—for it could be nothing but trouble which would bring men in such haste and she had a crisp fear that it pertained to Beck.

"They've got Cole down there with a lot of your calves an' he's put his brand on 'em. Webb's there, too, an' Hepburn. They're holdin' 'em all for you to come," the mes-

senger said. He was excited, he breathed rapidly and added: "Oliver an' Riley agreed you ought to come. It's your property . . . an' it's your fight."

Her fight! Her fight, indeed! Perhaps this was a drawing to a head of the forces that had been arrayed against her. The man had mentioned Webb and Hepburn as though he considered their presence of significance.

A pinto, this time, bore her away from the ranch, the man, tense and silent, riding beside her. She did not speak as they scrambled up the point and gained high country nor did she look at him as they set into a gallop again. An indistinct haze was coming in the west with a looming thunder head protruding from it here and there. The wind in their faces was hot and fitful. The scarf about her neck fluttered erratically.

Jane had little attention for the detail of that ride. This was her fight and she raced to meet it with an eagerness born of necessity to retain what she might of the happiness she had made hers. And as she rode Tom Beck, pieces cut from his chaps bound about his feet to protect them on the long journey by foot, his retrieved canteen over his shoulder, limped into the camp, heard the cook's vague, disconnected story of the discovery that had been made in the Hole, borrowed boots, saddled a horse and rode swiftly across the hills.

The pinto took Jane down the trail in great lunges, for she had no thought for dangers of the descent. At the foot was one of her men, Baldy Bowen, sitting ominously on his horse with a rifle across the horn. He watched her come and before she could speak jerked his head and said:

"They're waitin' for you, straight across there, ma'am."

She glanced in his direction and set off with renewed speed, winding through the cedars.

Against the far wall of the Hole was formed a curious group before a fence of brush and wire that blocked the entrance to a box gulch. H C riders were there, dis-

mounted, in a silent, unsmiling cluster. Under a cedar tree sat Cole, the nester, knees drawn up, arms falling limply over them; more than ever he seemed to be drooping, in spirit as well as body. He did not glance up; just sat, staring from beneath drooping lids at the ground. Nearby lounged one of Jane's cowboys, his holster hitched significantly forward.

Apart from these others stood Hepburn, Webb and Bobby Cole and one other, curiously out of place in his smart clothes: Dick Hilton. Now and then one of the four spoke and the others would eye the speaker closely; then look away, absorbed in a situation that was evidently beyond words. Sitting grouped on the ground were Webb's riders and Cole's Mexicans. They talked and laughed lowly among themselves and from time to time turned rather taunting grins at Jane Hunter's men.

At a short distance stood horses, grazing or dozing; listless, all. But there was no listlessness among the men. The atmosphere was tense . . . to the breaking point.

A rider came through the brush and stopped his horse. It was Sam McKee. He looked with widening eyes at the gathering, hesitated, as though to turn and leave, then approached.

"I seen two men in th' Gap," he said to Webb. "They said. . . ."

He looked about again.

"Well, get down an' set," Webb said cynically.

McKee stared from face to face.

"I guess I'll go on."

"I guess you'll stay here," said Jimmy Oliver firmly. "We've got a little matter to talk over an' nobody leaves. I guess the boys in th' Gap probably thought you'd like to hear what was goin' on."

Hilton stepped toward Oliver.

"Look here," he said, "I'm a disinterested party to all this. There's no use in my staying here."

"What I said to Sam goes for everybody else, Mister.

When we put riders in the Gap an' at the trails we intended for everybody to hang around. That goes. Everybody!"

Then he added: "If anybody wants to get out it'll be pretty good evidence that he's got somethin' to hide. This 's a matter that the whole country's interested in. You ain't got nothin' to hide, have you?"

The Easterner did not reply; turned back to Bobby with a grimace.

Sound of running hoofs and a quick silence shut down upon the gathering. The clouds were coming up more rapidly from the west; day was drawing down into them; the wind on the heights soughed restlessly.

Jane Hunter brought her pinto to an abrupt stop and sat, flushed and wind-blown, looking about.

"Well?" she said to Jimmy Oliver as he stepped forward.

"We sent for you, ma'am, because we stumbled onto somethin' that looks bad . . . for somebody."

Her eyes ran from face to face. In the expression of her men she read a curious loyalty, mingled with speculation. They watched her closely as Oliver spoke, as men look upon a leader, as though waiting for her to speak that they might act. Still, about them was a reservation, as though their acceptance of her was conditional, as though they wondered what she would say or do.

She saw Webb and Hepburn eyeing her craftily; she saw Bobby Cole's gaze on her, filled with hate and scorn . . . and a strange brand of fear. And she saw Dick Hilton, eyeing her with helpless rage and offended dignity. The entire assemblage was grimly in earnest.

"Go on," she said lowly and dismounted, standing erect on a rise of rock that put her head and shoulders above the others.

"Jim Black here,"—indicating a cowboy in white angora chaps—"took down the trail after a renegade steer this forenoon. He came on this place and a hot fire and a yearlin' steer of yours whose brand had been tampered with.

"There's been enough goin' on recent, ma'am, to let everybody know that something was pretty wrong. Mebby we've run onto the answer today. That's why we sent for you."

She looked about again and old Riley, moving out from the group slowly, as a man who feels that the welfare of others may be in his hands might move, said:

"For twenty years we've lived quite peaceable here, Miss Hunter. Since spring we've had anything but peace. It ain't a question that concerns any one of us alone; it effects the whole country. We've got evidence here of stealin'; we've got a man who, in our minds, ought to be tried for that crime. . . .

"We sent for you because it happened to be your property. There's plenty of law in the mountains, but things have happened here that have put men beyond that law. Parties have resorted to the law of strength, and not honest strength at that. It's time it was stopped or some of us ain't goin' to exist. . . .

"I know this ain't a pleasant task for a woman, but it seems like somethin' you've got to face . . . if you're goin' to stay here. I guess you understand that, ma'am."

Jane's heart leaped in apprehension, she was short of breath, blood roared in her ears, but she fought to retain at least a show of composure.

"It seemed there wasn't any way out of it, but to turn the matter over to you. We'll all tell what we know; we'll see that there's order here. We agreed you ought to sit as judge on the evidence against this man."

Again a consciousness of those faces upon her; faces of her men, honest, rugged, brave fellows, looking to her to stand alone! She knew, then, what that alloy in their loyalty had been. They would follow if she would lead; there was doubt in their hearts that she *could* lead, for she was a woman, she was a stranger and not their kind! For months they had watched her, refusing to judge, but now the time had come. Now, if she ever was to stand alone,

she must rise in her own strength and be worthy to lead such men!

Then there were those others: Hepburn and Webb and their outlaw following; perhaps, among them, the man who had shot Two-Bits down when he was serving her; perhaps the man who had burned her hay, broken her ditches, run off her horses. The men who would drive her out.

She felt suddenly weak. They were all watching her. This was the hour in which she must win or lose. It was *she*, not Alf Cole, who was on trial!

Jane began to speak, rather slowly, but evenly and clearly.

"I want the story from the beginning. Jim Black, will you tell what you know?"

Thus simply she accepted her responsibility to the country, took up her final fight for position there.

Black stepped forward, serious, quiet, showing no self consciousness whatever as the eyes swung upon him. Webb's riders had risen and were grouped behind their leader.

"Jimmy told you how I happened here. This steer, ma'am, cut across the flat an' I followed. I heard bawlin' over this way an', naturally, was surprised. Pulled up my hoss an' rode over. There was a fire in that gulch, an' it'd just been scattered. A man had been kneelin' down by it, an' there was one of your yearlin's hog-tied there. Your ear mark was still on him but your brand had been made from an H C into a T H O by crossin' the H an' closin' the C."

He stooped and with his quirt demonstrated thusly:

HC TO

"There was other calves in there. I counted sixteen. They was all T H O stuff an' they was all mighty young."

"Did you see any men?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I dragged it for high country, got Jimmy an' told him."

"Oliver, have someone bring out this yearling," Jane said.

Two men mounted their horses, opened the brush gate, roped the steer and dragged him, bawling, into the assemblage. Jane stepped down from her rock and, with a dozen others crowding about, examined the brand.

"That's unmistakable," she said lowly as she straightened. "Part of that brand healed months ago; the rest is fresh."

She moved back to the rock on which she had stood and rested a hand on the pinto's withers.

"Oliver, what did you do?" she asked.

"I gathered the boys an' come down here as fast as I could. I saw this pen an' the calves. I sent men to both trails an' two to the Gap with orders to shoot to kill anybody that tried to get out. Then I went to Cole's house.

"Cole swore up an' down that he didn't know anything about it. His gal was there an' this here party from the east,"—with a rather contemptuous jerk of his head toward Hilton. "I brought Cole back here an' the others followed.

"Seems Webb and Hepburn an' their men was in th' Hole. I didn't know it. Th' gal . . . she went to get 'em.

"It's just as well,"—dryly. "This ain't a matter that affects any one of us. It's for everybody in th' country to consider."

Hepburn stirred uneasily as Jane looked from Oliver to him.

"I think all that's necessary is to talk to Mr. Cole," she said.

The nester looked up slowly and laboriously gained his feet. He slouched toward the girl.

"I don't know nothin' about it," he said in his whining voice.

Bobby Cole took a quick step forward as he spoke, but Hepburn put out a detaining hand and muttered a word. She stopped. Her face was colorless; eyes hard and bright;

she breathed quickly and seemed almost on the verge of tears.

"Who built this pen?" Jane asked.

"I don't know."

"Did you ever see it before?"

"No, I — well, I did *see* it, but I don't know nothin' about it."

"You've been here all the Spring and didn't know anything about it?"

Her tone was sharp, decisive and the color had mounted in her face. She leaned slightly forward from the hips.

"No, I don't know nothin' about it," he protested, lifting his characterless eyes to her's.

"Who brands your cattle?"

"I do."

"No one else?"

"Not another," — with a slow shaking of the head.

"Can you think of anybody who would put your brand on my cattle?"

"No. Nobody would hev done that."

"But have you looked at this steer?" — indicating the yearling with the indisputable evidence on his side.

Cole lifted an unsteady hand to scratch his mustache, eyed the animal furtively and glanced at Hepburn. As their eyes met Hepburn's head moved in slight, quick negation. Ever so slight, ever so quick, but Jane Hunter saw and Hepburn saw that she saw and a guilty flush whipped into his face, spreading clear to the eyes.

"Hasn't someone been working over my brand?" she demanded, forcing Cole to look at her again.

"I don't know . . . I dunno nothin' about it. . . ."

She breathed deeply and moved a step backward.

"How do you suppose these calves come to be here? My calves, with your brand on them?"

"Them is my calves, ma'am," he protested, weakly. "Them is old brands."

"Oh, all but this yearling belong to you?"

"Yes,"—nodding his head as his confidence rallied. "Them's all mine. I branded 'em myself."

"And why do you keep them here?"

"Well, there's water an' feed an' I wanted to wean 'em —"

"And a moment ago you said you knew nothing about this pen?"

A flicker of confusion crossed the man's face and again he looked away toward Hepburn in mute appeal. Hepburn's face reflected a contempt, a wrath, and for a fraction of time Jane studied it intently, a quick hope forming in her breast. She lifted a hand to touch, in unconscious caress, the locket which was at her throat.

"Look at me, Cole!" she cried and her body trembled. Her tone was compelling, she experienced a sensation of mounting power, felt that she was dominating and without looking she knew that the men before her stirred, impressed by her rising confidence. "Look at me and answer my questions!"

Hesitatingly the man looked back and then dropped his eyes.

"Well, I said I knew it was here."

"You knew more than that. You have been using it. How long ago was it built?"

"A month — Oh, I dunno —"

"What about a month?" she insisted, gesturing brusksly.

"What about a month?"

"I dunno."

She relaxed a trifle again and eyed the confused, visibly agitated man. For a breath the place was in utter silence. The gloom deepened; the wind held off. It was as though the crisis were at hand. . . . And just then the man at the foot of the trail across the flat put down his rifle and said with a short laugh:

"I didn't make you out, Tom."

When Jane spoke again it was in an easier tone.

"How did you happen to come to this country, Cole?"

He looked up, relief showing in his face as she abandoned the other line of questioning. Hepburn stirred and Webb lifted a hand to hook his thumb in his belt.

"Why, I heered about this place. Good feed an' water an' a place to settle. So I just come; that's all."

"How did you hear about it?"

"A feller told me."

"Who?"

"I dunno his name. I—"

"How many cows have you?"

Her voice was suddenly sharp and hard as she cut in on his impotent evasion and shifted her subject again.

"Why, 'bout twenty."

"And how many calves are with them?"

He seemed to calculate, but she insisted, leaning closer to him:

"How many calves?"

"Why, not more'n half of 'em got calves."

"Sure? Not more than half?"

"Why . . . I guess—"

"And you've got sixteen young calves in this pen! How do you account for that?"

A murmur ran among her men and Cole looked at her with fright in his eyes.

"I dunno!" he suddenly burst out, voice trembling. "I dunno nothin' about it. You've all got me here an' are pickin' on me. I didn't steal anything. I thought they was all mine." And then, in a broken, repressedly frantic appeal: "I don't want to go to jail again. I don't know nothin' . . ."

"Again?" she said, quite gently.

He looked at her and nodded slowly. The little resistance he had offered her was gone; his limbs trembled and his eyes had that whipped, abject look that a broken spirited dog will show.

"You've been in jail once? For stealing cattle?"

"I didn't steal. . . . They said I did. They didn't want me around. They're like all you big outfits; they don't want me . . . they don't want me. . . ."

He lifted one hand in a gesture of hopeless appeal and tears showed in his eyes. They didn't want him, as she didn't want him! And suddenly an overwhelming pity surged upward in the girl for this man. It was like her, like all the Jane Hunters, like all men and women in whose hearts great strength and great pity is combined. There was no question of his guilt, but he was helpless before her; his fate was in her hands . . . and back in her mind that other theory was forming; that other hope was coming to stronger life. . . .

"Cole, did you steal my calves?"

She leaned low and spoke intently; her voice was a mingling of resolution and warmth that created confidence in his heart. For a moment he evaded her look; then answered it and a sob came up into his thin throat and shook it. He looked from her to Hepburn and then to Webb and read there something that Jane, whose eyes followed his, could not read; all she could read was threat . . . threat, threat!

"Did you steal my calves?" she repeated in a tone even lower.

She saw her men strain forward.

"Oh, I don't want to go to jail!" he said and tears streamed down his seamed cheeks. "I took 'em . . . but I'm a poor man . . . a poor man. . . ."

From Bobby came a stifled cry. She started forward again, but this time it was Hilton who grasped her arm, rather roughly. He drew her back, hissing a word between his teeth. His eyes glittered.

Riley stepped forward quickly beside Cole. His face was strained; mouth very grim. Oliver was beside him; breathing quickly.

"What's your verdict, Miss Hunter?" Riley asked. His voice was hoarse.

"You have heard it," she said gently. "You heard it from his lips."

She was not looking at them, but at Bobby Cole, who stood with knuckles pressed against her lips, fright, misery in her staring eyes. The strength, the vindictiveness was gone. She was a little girl, then, a little girl in trouble!

"Then I guess there's nothin' to do, but to go through with this ourselves." The old cattle man spoke slowly and rather heavily. "Cole, there's a way of treatin' thieves in this country that's gone out of fashion in recent years; we ain't had to hang nobody for a long time, but —"

"Stop!"

It was a clear, ringing cry from Jane that checked Riley, that caused the man who had grimly picked up his rope to stand holding it motionless in his hand.

"This is a matter for all of us, but by common consent I was selected to judge this man. He has admitted his guilt after an opportunity to protest his innocence. Now you must let me pass sentence. . . ."

"Sentence, ma'am?" Riley asked. "There's only one way. This has been war: they've warred you, they've threatened to drive you out. It's you or . . . your enemies. This man is your proven enemy. Make an example of him. He's guilty; nothin' else should be considered!"

"One thing," she said, smiling for the first time that afternoon, a slow, serious, grave smile, withal a tender smile, as she looked at Cole, the trembling craven.

"One thing: The quality of mercy!"

"Men, do you know that line? 'The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven'?"

"Mercy is the most holy thing in human relations. It is a blessing not only to the man who receives it, but to the man that gives!"

The first, dissenting stir died. This was no dodging, no evading the issue. This was something new and her manner caught their interest as she stood with one outstretched

hand appealing frankly for their attention and understanding.

"This man has stolen from me. You have seen him here. He has shown himself to be a weakling, a poor, wretched man, who has neither friends nor respect for himself. He has known trouble before." She looked from the man before her to Bobby whose strained face was on her's with amazement, whose breast rose and fell irregularly, in whose eyes stood tears. "I think that he has known little but trouble; he has been unfortunate perhaps because he tried to help himself by troubling others. There is only one thing left in life for him and that is his liberty.

"He cannot hurt me. He cannot hurt any of us from now on. He knows what we know of this thing today. He will stand before us all as a man who has not played the game fairly.

"Do you fear him? Do you young, strong men fear this man? . . . No, you don't! No more than I. We have seen him humbled; we have heard him plead. Giving him his liberty will cost us nothing. I will go so far as to promise you that he will never steal from us again . . . if we do this for him. . . . Don't you agree with me?"

She looked from face to face, but as her eyes traveled they were not for an instant unconscious of other faces . . . back there; faces to which had come relief, relaxation, color, after tensity and pallor; faces which the next instant were dark and apprehensive, for she said:

"I don't want you to think that I am through . . . not now. There has been stealing, but that has been only a part of the trouble. There have been other things, things which this man who we know has stolen would not do. Let us not be satisfied with cutting off the top of this weed which has poisoned the range; let us try to get to the roots and tear them out!"

She stood, beautiful in the confidence which, with a sentence, with a gesture, had checked these men in their determination to administer justice as it once had been admin-

istered in those hills, which had stilled dissent on their lips, which had switched their reasoning into a new path. Alone among them she could dominate! Her strength, doubted an hour ago, over-rode Riley's influence, created by years of prestige on the range, even made that old cattleman stand back and wait respectfully, wondering what she had to say. Her color was high, eyes bright, lips parted slightly in a grave, assured smile, and he one extended hand, small, white, delicate held them!

"This thievery was only a symptom, only an indication of what has transpired," she went on. "Just the outward evidence of those desires and impulses which have turned into chaos the peace of this beautiful country. Into that we must inquire and there is one more witness I want to call."

She hesitated, then said gently:

"Bobby Cole."

A low murmur again ran through the group and from the clouds above them came a muttering of thunder.

All turned to look at the girl and so intent were they that they did not see a horseman ride through the trees and stop and look; and dismount. Tom Beck walked slowly toward the group, until he could lay a hand on the hip of Jane Hunter's pinto. Then he stood behind her, eyes curious.

"Will you come up here and talk to me?" Jane asked.

The other girl remained motionless.

"Well now, Miss Hunter, don't you think—" Hepburn began in mild protest.

"I think many things, Mr. Hepburn. My purpose is either to justify or to convince myself that I think wrongly. Will you come . . . Bobby?"

Almost mechanically the girl moved forward. Hilton muttered a quick word to Webb and Webb glanced back nervously. Two of his men moved closer.

"But we've found out about your calves, Miss Hunter. What else do you want to know?"

Hepburn's voice was breath-choked though outwardly he maintained composure.

"It makes damned little difference." It was Riley speaking and his hand was on his holster. "Hepburn, you and everybody else stand pat until you're called for."

Hepburn's eyes flared malevolently. He started to speak again, but closed his lips, as in forbearance. Sam McKee coughed with a dry, forced sound.

"What is it you want with me?"

Bobby stopped before Jane and eyed her up and down, gaze settling on the girl's face finally. There was hostility in it; there was hate . . . a degree; but these were softened, subdued, leavened by an outstanding appreciation. Her lips trembled and, almost thoughtlessly, she put out a hand to touch her father's, fingers squeezing his in a movement of affection . . . and relief.

For a moment Jane did not speak. Then she began, lowly, rapidly, flushed but resolute and with a light of friendliness in her eyes.

"I want you to understand me . . . without any more delay. You and I came into this country at about the same time. Where we should have been friends from the first we have been enemies; it even came to such a pass that you promised to drive me from the country."

Her voice shook a bit and on the words that old hostility leaped back into Bobby's face.

"I think that was because you did not understand me. You have thought that I wished you bad luck from the first and that is not so. Had I wanted to have vengeance on you, had I wanted to drive you out, I could have done so this afternoon . . . only a moment ago. I am not trying to impress you with my generosity because I don't feel that I have been generous. I have tried to be just; that is all. I have tried to do the thing that would mean the most to all of us. . . .

"But there are things with which you can help me, I

am sure. There are so many things that we have in common. You see, you and I are very much alike."

That touched the other's curiosity. She was all intent, lips parted, eyes wondering.

"Alike?" She was incredulous.

Jane nodded.

"The thing that you want most of all is the thing that I want more than anything else: That is the respect of men."

She paused and Bobby's brows drew together in perplexity.

"The first time I saw you, you were trying to win the respect of the men in this country with your quirt. Perhaps that helped you. Perhaps it would have helped me had I been able or inclined to take it that way.

"That doesn't matter. The thing that matters, which gives us something in common is this: You found that men did not respect you and so did I. Men showed their disrespect for you by . . . well, by saying unpardonable things. Men have shown their disrespect for me by trying to drive me out of the country, by burning and stealing and shooting at my men. . . .

"You and I are the only women here. These men,"—with a gesture—"can not understand what their respect means to us. It is the only thing worth while in our lives. Isn't that so? No woman can be happy or satisfied unless she has the respect of men. That is because our mothers for generations back have been mothers because men respected them. . . .

"I don't believe from what I know of you that you have ever had much respect from men. I can appreciate what that means to you, because it appears that the man who should have respected me the most in the country where I came from, did not respect me.

"There was one man I used to know who was supposed to give me all the respect that a man could give a woman: he said that he loved me. That man,"—there was a quick movement in the group which she ignored—"followed me

west to tell me that he loved me again and when he found that I could not love him, he showed that he did anything but respect me. Do you understand how that could hurt? When a man who had sworn for years that he loved me proved that . . . it was something quite different?"

She paused and Bobby, wide-eyed, said:

"He follered you out here to . . . try to get you to marry him?"

Jane nodded.

The other girl turned and her eyes sought out Hilton's face, which was contorted with raging humiliation.

"Is that so?" she asked.

"That's a lie!" he snarled, but looked away.

"Is that so?"

Her tone was lowered, but she hissed the question at him. She strained forward, glaring at him, and averting his face he said again:

"It's a lie."

But the assertion was without conviction, without strength.

Bobby turned back. Her lips were tight and trembling.

"Well?" she said, tears in her eyes again, and her manner proved that Hilton's denial had fallen far short of being convincing.

"Then there were other factors: As soon as I arrived here things commenced to go wrong. Because I was a woman, people thought they could usurp my rights. My horses were stolen; my hay was burned; my ditches broken. My men were shot at. A note was sent to me, telling me that I'd better leave the country while I had something left.

"You see, don't you, that that meant that men — it must have been men who did it — had no respect for me?"

"This water down here was fenced. That was your right, but I thought I could persuade you to help me a little. I think yet that I could have done so but for your misunderstanding. . . .

"I knew that you wanted the respect of men. I knew that about all you had in life was your self respect. I knew

that the same man who had made love to me and who had not meant it, was making love to you and not meaning it. I called him to see me and tried to talk him out of it, begged him to go away from you before . . . before you had stopped respecting yourself. You must have mistaken my motive in—"

"You didn't send for him to ask him to take you back? You didn't do that?"

"I have told you my motive once; that was the truth . . . whole truth."

Again Bobby turned and again her accusing, flaring eyes sought Hilton's distraught face.

"So you lied to me again, did you? That was a lie, was it?" She waited. "Well, why don't you answer?" she flung at him and stood, directing on him the hate that she had once shown for Jane Hunter.

But when she wheeled sharply back to confront the mistress of the H C her eyes were bathed in tears, her head was thrown back, and she threw her arms wide.

"He did lie to me!" she panted. "He did. . . . I hated you because I thought you had friends an' folks that respected you. He lied an' it made me hate you worse. . . ." She choked with sobs and Jane stepped down from the rock to put hands on her shoulders.

"Oh, miss, I've acted so bad to you!" Bobby moaned lowly. "I . . . I didn't know, didn't understand. I thought you didn't want anything but harm to come to us. I stole from you because I hated you. . . . I . . ."

She threw back her head again and the weakness of spiritual distress dropped from her. Her voice grew full and firm.

"You've treated us like nobody else ever treated us before. You had Alf tied down to a calf stealin' an' you let him go. You. . . . You've been tryin' to do me good all the while I've been tryin' to do you harm. They've been warrin' on you an' I . . . I could have stopped it!"

She wheeled, facing the men, her back to Jane. Her

shoulders were drawn up and she leaned backward. Her face was white, voice shrill. Her eyes burned.

"Well . . . you, Webb, an' Hepburn an' your whole filthy crew . . . I'm done with you at last!"

Thunder boomed sharply. The gloom was so deep that the features of the men she addressed could scarcely be made out.

"You've tried to double-cross us from the first. You was as guilty as Alf today but you had it on us. I couldn't make a move without gettin' in worse. . . . You, Hilton, if it hadn't been for you, I'd have sent the bunch of you to hell by tellin' th' straight story when they came for Alf today! I . . . I thought you loved me,"—gaspingly. "Ah! I thought you loved me, an' I'd have let Alf go to jail alone because of it. . . .

"Well, it ain't too late! Listen, all of you! You H C riders, don't let a man move until I get through!"

Her eyes, quick, alert, intent, ran from face to face before her and her whole body trembled as though the things that she would tell clamoured to be out and were held back by great effort until she could make them coherent.

"Hepburn, you're first!"

The man made one movement aside as if he would evade and Tom Beck's voice rang out sharply:

"Not a move!"

Jane Hunter wheeled, a stifled word in her throat and watched him slowly advance. His face was drawn as by great suffering, his eyes burned as though his heart was wrenched with every beat. His mouth was set and his jaw thrust forward and the revolver he held close against his hip was as steady as rock. He moved slowly forward.

"Swing back there, you men,"—and at his gesture the H C riders deployed, swinging to either side. He stood beside the two girls at the point of a V, the sides of which were formed by cowboys and beyond the opening of which the other group drew together as for protection in the face of this coming storm. Hepburn was foremost and the true

scoundrel now glared through the mask of his benevolence.

"Go on," Beck said quietly.

"You're first," the girl repeated, as though there had been no interruption.

"You planned to steal the H C blind, as soon as th' old owner died. You didn't have th' nerve to do it like I'd 've done it. You sent for us, because you knowed Alf had this brand which 'uld make stealin' easy!"

"You're lying!"

The man's voice was the merest croak, weak and unimpressive.

"You wrote us, sayin' it would be easy pickin'. You said you would likely be foreman an' that anyhow you'd be workin' for the H C an' was goin' to help us from the inside.

"When Miss Hunter come an' you saw what she was like you was mighty glad of it. You thought you could ruin her an' pretend you was trying to protect her. You was goin' to get half what we got for your share.

"You had Webb run off them eight horses. Th' cat got out of the bag an' you had to bring 'em back to make good with Beck. I heard you tell Alf about it the night you started out an' stayed with us. Beck suspected you, so you shot your own saddle horn to make your story good.

"Beck wasn't satisfied. He was in your way, so you an' Webb framed up a lie about him an' fixed his gun so it would look bad for him . . . an' it didn't work because Miss Hunter here beat you to it.

"Then you threw in with Webb an' we was all goin' to work together and drive the H C out in a rush.

"You dynamited Cathedral Tank to spoil that range. Then somebody shot Two-Bits an' you planned with us not to let her have water, knowin' her cattle would perish. I was glad enough to keep 'em from water then because I thought . . . I thought she wasn't . . . what she is."

She paused, panting, and brushed a quick hand at her tears.

"Webb, you've been stealin' off th' H C for years."

The man took a quick step forward and halted as gun hands jerked rigid.

"You've been waitin' your chance. When Beck made you swallow your words about Miss Hunter you went hog-wild to get him. You got carin' more about that than you did about gettin' rich.

"You shot at Beck's bed to kill him when he slept. You broke her ditches an' fired her hay with your own hands. You wrote that note, warnin' her to get out. You helped build this pen here an' you helped steal these calves an' every one of 'em was took away from an H C cow. You stole twenty head of horses than nobody knows about.

"You an' Hepburn thought I didn't know a lot of this. Well, I did know! I knowed you was goin' to double-cross us if the pinch come an' Alf, he was afraid of it, too!

"I heard you talkin' nights in our place. I watched you ridin' when you didn't know I was around. I listened an' remembered. I was one of you, but I didn't trust you. I wanted to steal from Miss Hunter. I wanted to drive her out because . . . because I didn't know anybody could be kind to me like she's been. I never thought anybody'd do anythin' for me!"

She stopped again to regain control of her surging emotions.

"An' their riders, Miss Hunter"—half turning to look at the other woman. "They're a bunch of cut-throats. So are our greasers. They ain't been in on the stealin'. They didn't care about bein' inside, but they was ready to murder if they had a chance. They—Hepburn an' Webb—they thought that they was safe because every one of the rest had enough over him to hang. If one squealed they'd all get caught. . . .

"Even us! Why, we never had any right on this claim. Alf's used his homestead rights before, under another name. This water don't belong to us. Not by rights. It's all open

range! That's what we was: t' worst nest of outlaws that ever got together in these hills!"

She choked and Jane, her hands on the other's arms, could feel the tremors shooting through her lithe frame.

Riley moved a step forward as thunder rolled heavily overhead, as if this much of the story was enough, but the girl cried out:

"That ain't all! I've got to go through with it! I've finished with the rest an' now it's you. . . . Hilton!"

Into the word she put bitter contempt and biting scorn.

"Bah! You liar!" she drawled. "You liar, you sneak, you coward! You thought none of us could follow your game an' none of us could . . . until now.

"Why, you've been behind this whole thing. It was you called Hepburn to town an' offered him money to use in his dirty work. You paid for this fence of ours. You listened an' used your head. You saw things quicker 'n Hepburn an' Webb did, an' you set them two thinkin' an' they never knew you was doin' it. . . .

"He was th' brains, I tell you!"—with an inclusive gesture to the men who listened so attentively. "He wanted to drive Miss Hunter out worse 'n anybody. He wanted to kill Tom Beck. He didn't have the nerve to do it himself . . . in a fair fight. He shot at him one day with a rifle but just as he shot Beck stopped his horse to look at somethin' in his hands, that locket he always wears an' is always lookin' at, I guess. . . . He didn't know I saw that but I did. . . .

"He was always talkin' Sam McKee, there, up to kill Beck. It's likely McKee shot Two-Bits—"

"He didn't! I didn't do it!"

McKee's voice, an excited cackle, broke in on her but the girl, ignoring, went on:

". . . It was just like he tried to talk Webb an' Hepburn into killin'. That was his way: makin' other folks do th' things he was scared to do!

"An' he was as slick with me as he was with them, with

his lies about being called here to help Miss Hunter on business! That's why I didn't think all this out before, that's why I didn't think he was a sneak until now. He . . . he said he wanted to marry . . . to marry me. . . ."

She put a palm against her lips, tears spilled over her cheeks as she turned. For a brief, heartbroken moment she stood looking into Jane Hunter's face, then bowed her head to the other's shoulder and cried stormily.

Beside the girls was a quick movement, a man uttering one explosive word as though it gave vent to an emotion that had been pent deep in his heart for long and while the black storm clouds seemed to shut down and muffle every sound, even Bobby Cole's excited sobbing, Tom Beck cried twice:

"Jane! . . . Jane!"

Bobby, at that, turned from Jane to her father and the mistress of the H C faced her foreman. When she had first seen him she betrayed little except surprise; now she made one movement as though she would throw herself upon him but again the look in his face checked her.

"You came back to me, Tom," she said.

"Back," he answered. . . . "But I can't ever come back to . . . you. . . ."

It was the miserable self loathing, the shame in his heart, which spoke, and it was that which made her see him, not as the strong man he had been but as a broken, penitent, self denying individual . . . denying himself the love that was in her eyes, mingled with the relief at his return and the joy of triumph which still thrilled her . . . that love which he felt unworthy to claim because he had doubted it!

And then he changed. A movement sharp, decided, in the group, stiffened him.

"Hold up!" he cried. "Don't one of you move! Jimmy, take two men to the Gap. Hold everybody in this Hole until we can get the sheriff, this'll be a clean-up for—"

A blinding flare, a crash of thunder that tore sky and

shook earth, broke in on him. There was a rending of tough timber as the bolt ripped down a cedar, a snorting of horses. And in that stunning instant Dick Hilton leaped from the group, vaulted to his saddle and lashing the horse frantically, made off.

A revolver cracked, a rifle crashed. Hilton disappeared into a deluge of huge drops that came from the low, scudding clouds. Others got to their horses and a fusillade of shots sounded like the ripping of strong cloth. And above it rang Jane Hunter's voice:

"Tom! Oliver! Hold these men. I'll bring the sheriff! You can spare me and only me!"

With a hoarse cry Riley dropped his revolver and clutched at his wounded shoulder. Horses with riders and horses running wild circled the place where a moment before had been a compact group of men, but now Jane Hunter and Tom Beck stood there alone while from all about stabs of fire pricked the darkness or were lost as the sky blazed, while those who shot scarcely knew whether they were defending themselves from friend or foe.

CHAPTER XXVII

BATTLE!

JANE found herself on the pinto racing through the night, ducking under cedars until she was clear of the timber, crashing through brush, leaping washes and at her side, silent, close, protecting her, an arm ready to grasp her body should her horse fall, rode Tom Beck.

They made straight across the flat toward the foot of the trail. To their right was shooting and behind them a sharp volley rattled. A stray bullet *singed* angrily, close over their heads.

"You've got to get out of this, ma'am," Beck cried. "There'll be hell to pay before mornin'. There's nothing they won't do now."

"Tom! You came!"

Her eyes were blinded by tears as she turned her face to him, trying to put into words the forgiveness which she deemed unnecessary and which she knew was the one essential to Tom Beck, which she knew would be almost impossible to convey convincingly. But through the tears she saw the flash of a gun before them and an answering flash. A lengthy flicker of lightning showed two figures. One, Dick Hilton, horse drawn back on his hocks, revolver lifted. They saw him shoot again and they saw that other figure, Baldy Bowen, who was there to block the trail, crumple in his saddle and sag forward, struggle heavily to regain his position and then, as his frightened horse moved quickly, plunge in an ungainly mass to the ground.

Beck raised his gun as Hilton's horse leaped for the trail. He shot but the instant of light had passed, making the world darker by contrast. They saw fire shoot from scrambling hoofs.

The burst of rain had ceased, the interval of fury broken; the storm still swirled, roaring, above them, but it was dry and black, threatening, holding in reserve its strength. . . .

The sound of another horse, cutting in before them, running frantically, and Beck's gun hand went up only to poise arrested as a voice came to them with the singing of a rope end that flayed the animal's flanks.

"Go; go! Take me after him!"

It was Bobby Cole's cry. She had seen. She was riding on the trail of the man who would have been her betrayer.

They dismounted hastily and stooped over the figure that lay quiet on the rocks. Jane stilled her sobbing as Beck rolled the body over and felt and listened.

"Dead," he said huskily.

"Dead!" echoed Jane. "Dick killed him! Oh . . . beastly!"

Fresh firing behind them. The shout of a man and an answer. More shots, coming closer.

"You've got to get out," Beck said lowly, lifting her from her knees beside the dead rider. "There'll be hell here to-night and it's no place for you. You bring the law!"

"I feel as though I should stay. There'll be others killed and it's my fight!"

Her's was a cry of anguish, but he replied:

"You'll save lives by bringin' help. And hurry, ma'am, hurry!"

His only thought was to get her to safety.

A rifle crashed twice not a hundred yards from them and they heard a running horse grunt as spurs raked his sides.

"Get up and get out!" he cried hoarsely, fearful that she might insist on lingering in this place which, this night, was well named Devil's Hole.

"There's only one of 'em ahead of you. He's bound only to make his get-away. . . . An' the Catamount, she'll clear your way if he does turn back!"

He lifted her bodily to her horse.

"It seems my place to stay!" she cried as shots peppered the storm. "To stay with you, Tc n!"

"It's your place to get out! Ride!"

He swung his hat across the pinto's hind quarters and the animal leaped into the trail. He heard Jane cry out to him to stop.

"Go on!" he shouted. "Go on! It's your job to bring help!"

And he heard her go on, the horse floundering up the steep rise, and knew that she obeyed. Then he turned and looked out across the flat.

Far down toward Cole's cabin was a shot. A riderless horse went past him, blowing with excitement. He crouched behind a boulder, gun in his hands, peering into the darkness. Others would not travel that trail that night so long as he was on guard. . . .

The fight had been carried in both directions, further up into the Hole, on down toward the Gap. H C riders, partially assembled and identified, had closed on the outlaws, cut them off from the trail and for the space of many minutes there was no revealed action, each waiting for the others to show themselves.

Again in the distance was the mutter of thunder and a brilliant, prolonged flash of lightning. The wind had subsided to breathless silence as if the heavens marshaled their forces for fresh outbursts. Beck started up as the clouds flared, looking quickly about. He saw a horse with an empty saddle. He saw a man standing waist deep in brush, a rifle at his hip, ready to fire. He could not recognize the man. Darkness; again, a silent lighting of the skies, and with that the stillness was broken. There was the sharp crack of a rifle far to his left, up toward the head of the Hole. None replied to the shot. A moment later the clouds sent out their flare again . . . and this time two shots echoed.

Beck started up with a low cry. Above on the trail he had seen Jane Hunter's pinto, making for the high country, and those two stabs of yellow flame had been aimed upward and toward the wall to which her path clung.

It seemed to the man an age until lightning again revealed the earth. He had an impression of a horseman far toward the top of the trail and behind him another, riding hard; and lastly, Jane's pinto toiling bravely up the sharp climb.

And as darkness cut in again two more fangs of flame darted toward her!

Jane Hunter, without protection, wholly revealed by the lightning, was a target for merciless men, for men who had nothing to lose and at least a fighting chance to gain by stopping her!

He had believed that she was going to safety; he had underestimated the maliciousness of those men she had driven into the open that afternoon. He had neglected to consider the fact that on the trail she was without protection of any sort and that lightning would make her stand out like a cameo! He forgot his mental stress, he relegated his duty as sentinel to inconsequence, for she was in great danger and needed help! It was a joy to know that the life in his body, the blood in his flesh, might be the one thing she needed, for only by offering those possessions could he atone for his faithlessness. He had no idea that he could regain that desire to possess her. He only wanted her to know that what he had to give was hers; that was all!

Then another rider was on the trail: Tom Beck, roweling his horse, fanning his shoulders with the rein ends, crying aloud to him for speed, his gun in his holster, a useless thing.

He rode with abandon in the darkness, urging the horse to a speed that mocked safety. Stones were scattered by the animal's spurning feet and he heard them strike below, the sounds becoming fainter as he mounted the steep rise. Lightning again and the viper spits down there in the flat licked out for the woman ahead. Beck swore aloud and beat his horse's flanks with his hat.

The darkness, though it handicapped speed and enhanced the danger of his race, was relief. When it was dark they could not fire. . . .

And he knew they were waiting down there, rifles ready, straining to see in the next burst of light. . . .

He begged of the Almighty to send rain, to hold back the lightning, but no rain came; the flares continued. He heard another shot, closer, from behind, and knew it was the rifleman he had seen standing in the brush firing at those who menaced Jane Hunter's safety.

He was gaining on the pinto, slowly, with agonizing slowness. His big brown horse drove on, but, when in darkness and without perspective, it seemed as though his hoofs beat upon a treadmill. The animal's excited breathing became more clearly defined. . . . The pinto ahead crawled slowly and awkwardly like a dying animal, many minutes from shelter. . . .

One of those spurts of flame stung toward Beck. He heard, almost as he saw it, the spatter of a bullet on the rock behind him. He lay low on his horse's mane.

The glimmer of lightning, unaccompanied now by thunder, became almost continuous. Against the white face of the mountain the riders were like silhouette targets. Below there were stabs of fire from a dozen places, like fire-flies on a summer night, but carrying death.

Two bullets, close together, snarled past him, one above, the other just ahead, perhaps in a line behind his horse's ears. He hoped wildly that they were directing all their fire at him, that he was drawing it from the girl above but even as this hope mounted the skies coruscated again and he saw that the pinto was stopped, saw that Jane was slipping to the narrow trail, her body wedged between the cliff and the body of the horse.

For an interminable time blackness seemed to hold. The big brown, whose breath was now laboring with exhaustion as well as with excitement, gasped scarcely a dozen breaths before the greeny light came again but to his rider it was an aeon of time. Tom Beck passed through the veriest depths of torment in that interval and unconsciously he

shouted into the night incoherent cries of suffering. He had been too late! He had sent her to physical suffering, to her death, perhaps, and before he could make her understand that he blamed himself as only a just man who has been unjust can crush himself with execration!

But light came and he saw her, still alive, still safe!

The pinto was down, hind feet over the trail. Wounded, he had tried to turn back, tail to the abyss as a mountain bred animal will turn. He had moved on unsteady limbs, his hind feet slipped over the edge and moaning, head back, eyes bulging, he clawed with his fore hoofs to stay his fall. Clinging to the reins, calling aloud her encouragement, the girl helped with voice and limbs.

For an interval she balanced the pull of the animal's own weight. . . .

And when Tom Beck could see again she was alone on the trail, one arm raised to her face as she cringed from the bullets that spattered all about!

He cursed his horse, lashing furiously, spurring in the shoulders without mercy. He came up to her and she faced him, lips tight and in the dance of cloud fire he saw her eyes wide, nostrils distended.

"Get up here!" he muttered and lifted her to his saddle horn, winding his arms about her, bowing his head and shoulders over hers to take the missiles in his own body first.

She clutched him frantically, her warm arms around his neck, her trembling limbs across his thigh with his hand hooked beneath the knees, her soft breast cleaving to his and, slipping through his opened shirt the little gold locket that was at her throat pressed against his heart. . . . It was cold from the night and he felt it send a tingle through his body. Even then he wondered, with the strange sharpness which stressed thought will give to irrelevant matters, what it contained!

"Tom! It's good to have you!"

Good to have him! With death singing all about her it was good to have him; it was her first thought!

"It would be good to die for you!" he said.

"No, no!"—sharply. "Not that, Tom! Live for me . . . live for me!"

She felt him start and shudder and sway and a moan broke from his lips as a scorching, tearing thing ripped at the small of his back, burrowing devilishly into his very vitals. She clutched him closer, not understanding.

"It's all I've got to give you," he muttered unnaturally. "My life's all I've got, ma'am. I'd be proud to give it. . . . It's a little thing to give to pay . . . a debt like I owe you. . . ."

"You keep your body behind mine . . . always . . . until we get to the top. . . ."

"Tom!"—in alarm. "You're hit. . . . Oh, Tom!" She shook him, hitching herself about that she might see his face. "Tom!"

"A scratch," he said. "Just a —"

The horse threw up his head and recoiled as a bullet sang past.

"A — scratch," he finished.

The girl looked about wildly. She knew there was no shelter there, not a ledge behind which they could hide, not a tree that would screen them. The wall rose straight on one side, fell sheer on the other. There was no place to go but up; they could not turn there and go down for there was no room . . . the pinto, shot through the belly, had tried that!

The firing below grew more rapid. It did not wait for the lightning flashes now. Those spats of yellow fire struck upward continuously; in darkness, blindly; in light searching intelligently as the riders moved upward, nearer safety. H C men closed in on those who shot at the figures on the trail, aiming at the flurries of viper light, meeting counter fire as they drew nearer the murderous group of men.

"Fireflies!" Beck muttered as he looked down again. "Lightnin' bugs let loose from hell!"

When there was no fire in the clouds those light points

looked so harmless, down there in the soft, velvet darkness! Well they might have been insects, bedecking a summer night . . . but from them came the whining, droning, searching projectiles that flew to find his life and Jane Hunter's life!

Fifty yards further was the first rise of rock that would protect them from below. Fifty yards, and the horse, under this added burden, was sobbing as he staggered.

Beck swayed forward and regained his balance with an effort that cost him a groan, but his arms, tight about Jane Hunter's body did not relax a trifle; they held like tough, green wood. The girl cried out to him again, that he was hurt. . . .

"It's nothin', . . . my life," he replied. "It's all I could do . . . for doubtin' you. I couldn't ask you to . . . love me. . . . I could die for you . . . that's all, ma'am. . . ."

"Tom, Tom! Keep your head; keep your head one minute longer; we'll be safe. . . . Safe, then. . . ."

Thirty yards to the place where the trail ran between up-rising walls of rock; thirty yards to that shelter; thirty yards to safety. . . .

But she looked down at those deadly fireflies playing on the flat, and did not see a hatless man, crouched forward, run down the trail toward them, pistol in his hand. . . .

Dick Hilton, who had escaped the Hole only to realize that there was no escape, was waiting to vent the last drop of poison in his heart. . . . Nor did Jane see, nor did Hilton suspect, that waiting there for him was another stalker, who had followed and lost him, who had turned back, who had seen the travelers up the trail and who waited their approach screened by timber. . . .

Bobby Cole's heart leaped as she saw him run crouching to meet Tom Beck, and her gun leaped to position . . . and she waited there in the darkness for the next flash of light . . . as men waited below . . . as Jane Hunter waited, with her heart racing in despair; as Dick Hilton, gibbering under his breath, waited. . . .

The big brown horse stumbled and Tom Beck cried aloud in fear and pain, cried drunkenly, as his blood drenched the saddle. Twenty yards to the shelter of solid rock . . . ten . . . five. . . .

And a scarecrow figure leaped from it at them, revealed by a long, green glimmer.

"Damn you, Beck! Damn you, you've ruined me; you drove me to this. . . . Now, take th—"

His gun had whipped up even as the gun of the girl they saw behind him whipped up.

Neither fired.

Down below had come those winking fangs again and Hilton's voice trailed into a rising, rasping gasp as missiles from his compatriots drilled his body.

His pistol dropped to the rock. He put his hands to his stomach.

"Damn your—"

He choked on the word, and as he choked he took one blind step forward, over the brink. As he fell he threw up his hands and sailed downward into the depths, into the coming darkness. . . .

The brown horse had halted, but as Jane Hunter slipped to the ground, holding Beck's sagging body with all her strength, he stepped forward, in behind the rocks: their haven. . . .

"Oh, they got him!" Bobby sobbed. "They got him. . . ."

She might have meant Hilton, but if so the pity, the regret in her voice was a mourning of her dead love, not the dead lover; or she might have meant Tom Beck and the tone might have been sympathy for the woman she had come to understand, the woman who had respect for her and who she could respect. . . .

They let Tom's body to the trail. The horse moved off. Hastily Bobby ripped open his shirt. . . .

"Through the hips," she whispered. "Through the hips. . . ."

"Look!"—starting up. "He's movin' his foot. It didn't get his spine; it didn't get his spine. . . ."

She tore open her shirt and tugged at the undergarment beneath it. She stuffed it into the wound deftly, staying the blood while Jane Hunter, Beck's head in her lap, cried aloud.

"Listen!" Bobby knelt beside the other woman, hands on her shoulders, peering into her face. . . . "You're safe here. They've got 'em cut off from this trail below. . . ."

"My horse is fresh. I'm goin' to your ranch for help. He ain't goin' to die, ma'am. . . . I promise you that. . . . He ain't goin' to die!"

She was gone and Jane Hunter, half faint, clinging to that promise as the last, the only thing in life, lowered her lips to her lover's eyes.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAST STRAW

IT was the first day that Tom Beck could lie on his back. For weeks he had lain on his face there in the living room of the ranch house, nursed back to health by Jane Hunter's gentle hands. Now the doctor had turned him over, with the promise that he would not only be sitting up but walking before long, and the Veterans' Society had been in session.

That was what Two-Bits called it: The Veterans' Society. Every afternoon they had gathered there, Two-Bits with his slowly healing back, Jimmy Oliver, after his leg had mended and he could hobble with a cane, Joe Black, whose arm was just out of its sling and, occasionally, Riley, who rode up the creek holding gingerly his one shoulder, to fight the battle over again.

Summer was ripening and the golden sunlight spilled down onto peaceful mountains from a mighty sweep of sky. A gentle breeze bent the tall cottonwoods, making them whisper, making the birds in their branches sing in lazy contentment. Unmolested cattle ranged in prospering hundreds. The work was up, fall and beef ride were coming . . . and other years to bring their toll of happiness and well being, for after its one paroxysm of strife the country had settled back to easier ways, to a better, more wholesome manner of living.

There were memories, true, kept fresh by such things as this Veterans' Society, and the three graves in Devil's Hole where rested the bodies of Sam McKee, Dad Hepburn and Dick Hilton, for there was none to claim what remained of them. Under the cottonwoods slept Baldy Bowen, his grave:

surrounded by white pickets and his head marked by a stone.

But even now those memories were less poignant than they had been weeks before. Interest in the range war was waning and though it would be talked about across bar and bunk house stove for many winters the thrill of it was gone . . . as the horror of it was largely gone for those who had suffered most.

Two-Bits had lingered after the departure of the rest and sat in a chair beside Tom's cot. Beck's face was pale, but his eyes were alive and as of old, evidence of satisfactory convalescence.

"So you think there *is* a hell, Tommy?" he asked.

Beck grunted assent.

"Yeah. I know there's a hell, Two-Bits."

"My brother always said there was. He said it was an awful place, Tommy. I'll bet two bits th' old Devil was sorry to see Hepburn an' Hilton an' Sam McKee comin' in that mornin'! I'll bet he says to hisself: 'Here's some right smart competition for me!'"

Beck laughed silently.

"Sometimes I get feelin' mighty sorry for 'em," the lanky cow-boy continued. "I use to hate Webb somethin' awful an' I sure did think Hepburn was about th' lowest critter that walked. . . . God ought to 've made him crawl! Sam McKee never was no good. He was th' meanest man I ever saw. . . .

"But, shucks, Tommy, I hate to think of 'em bein' blistered all th' time!"

"That ain't the kind of hell I referred to, Two-Bits. I don't know much about that kind, with brimstone and fire and all the rest. . . .

"There's a hell, though, Tommy. It's when a man lets the weakness in him run off with what strength he has, when he don't trust those who deserve to be trusted, when he's suspicious of those his heart tells him are above suspicion."

Two-Bits swallowed, setting his Adam's apple leaping. His eyes widened.

"Gosh, you talk just like th' Reverend!" he said, and Beck laughed until his wound hurt him.

"Well, if they ain't in hell, they're under an awful lot of rocks," he added. "That's all I care, to have 'em out of her way."

"Yes, it makes it smother. Real folks, men who deserve the name, won't do anything but trust her and help her."

"Not after the way she made 'em come out of their holes! That trial must 've been grand, Tommy! I'd 've give two bits to seen it an' heard it!

"She won't have no trouble no more. Everybody knows she's got more head than most men on this here creek. But she's got somethin' else! She's got a . . . a gentle way with her that makes everybody want to do things for her.

"Look at how she treated Cole. Why, anybody else 'd run him off! 'Stead of that she gets Bobby Cole to file on that claim an' helps 'em to build a good house an' wants 'em to stay. You can bet your life that H C cattle 'll get water there now. That catamount . . . hell, she'd *carry* it for 'em if there wasn't any other way to get it to 'em!"

"Yes, Bobby's changed."

"Should say she is changed! She's got a different look to her, not so hard an' hostile as she used to be; she's plumb doe-cyle now!

"I expect she's glad she didn't kill Hilton. If she hadn't changed she'd been glad to do it. But, bein' like she is now, she wouldn't want to hurt nobody. . . . Unless that somebody wanted to hurt Miss Hunter."

His eyes roved off down the road and settled on a swiftly moving horse, the great sorrel who was bringing Jane Hunter back to the ranch after a ride far down the creek.

"Speakin' of Hell, Tommy: there mebbby ain't any like the Reverend claims there is, but there's a Heaven! I'll bet two bits there is! I'll gamble on it because I know an

angel that stepped right down that there, now, solid gold ladder. . . .

"She's comin' up th' road. . . . An' Mister Two-Bits Beal, *esquire*, is goin' to drift out of here!"

With a broad wink, which set a suggestion of a flush into Beck's cheeks, he took his hat and departed.

Jane entered, drawing the pin from her hat; then stopped on the threshold with a cry.

"Oh, the doctor's been here!"

"Yes, and he's rolled the old carcass over," Beck answered.

She stood looking down at him for a moment and then dropped quickly to her knees.

"It's so good to look into your eyes again," she whispered, and though her own eyes were bright there were tears in her voice.

Beck's gaze wavered and he slowly withdrew the hand that she had taken.

"You mustn't look like that!" he said, turning his face from her. "It's more than I've deserved, it's more than I have a right to!"

She put her hands on his shoulders, gently, bearing no weight upon them, and said soberly:

"Look at me, Tom Beck!"

He obeyed, rather reluctantly.

"I have waited, oh, so long, to talk to you! I promised the doctor that nothing should disturb you until you were well. That's one reason why I brought you into the house, instead of leaving you with the men: so you could be quiet.

"But there was another reason, a greater: I wanted you here, in this room, in my house, near me, where I could see and feel and help you, because seeing and touching and helping you helped me!

"I needed your help, Tom! I shall always need you near me!"

"Nobody would agree with you," he protested. "You're

the most capable man in the country. You sure can look out for yourself."

"But looking out for myself isn't all. That's just a tiny part of life,"—indicating how small it was with a thumb and fore-finger. "It belongs to the side of me which owns this ranch, which is a cattle woman, which wants to fatten steers and raise calves and prosper. . . .

"There's the other part, the big part, the part that is really worth while: It's my heart, Tom. It's my heart that needs you!"

His brows puckered.

"I wish you wouldn't!" he said huskily. "I can't help that part. I had my chance . . . an' I threw it away."

"And I picked it up! Tom, that morning when you were crawling back from Cathedral Tank, across the desert, I was at the round-up camp. I went there to tell you, to make you understand—"

"That's what hurts: that you had to ride thirty miles to tell me, to make me understand. Why, ma'am, I hadn't any right to have you do that for me. It was me who should have come crawlin' to you!"

She took his hand again.

"Look at me!"

"Yes, ma'am," striving to lighten his manner.

"Yes, *Jane!*" she insisted.

"Jane," very softly.

"You are very foolish, sticking to an abstract idea of how you should have conducted yourself. You wanted to die for me once; you want to put me off now because you think you wronged me.

"Don't you see what a wrong that would be! Don't you see that?"

She leaned forward, hands clasped at her chin, and tears swam upward into her eyes.

"I am saying the things I've waited so long to say.

"You have lain here ever since that black night when they carried you in and I had to feel your heart to know whether

you lived. I've tried to say nothing that would disturb you, tried to keep your mind off the thing that has occupied mine. But I know you've been thinking; I know you've been uneasy. I have seen that in the looks, the words, the way you've laughed, rather forced and weakly at times. I have known what you thought. . . .

"You are very foolish to be concerned with an idea of how you should have conducted yourself. You wanted to die for me once; you want to put me off now because you think you wronged me.

"I am not forgiving you because there is nothing to forgive. My pride was hurt and by yielding to it I shook your faith in me. It was weak for me to yield to pride; it was foolish for you to give way to suspicion. It was not I who yielded, Tom; it was that other girl, the girl who came to you to be hurt and ridiculed and made strong! And it was not the Tom Beck who loved me that suspected; it was that other man, the one who held himself back, who did not take chances, who, perhaps, would have denied himself the finest thing in life if he had always walked on ground with which he was familiar. . . .

"And now to carry this breach from the past into the future. . . . Don't you see what a wrong that would be? Don't you see how you would be harming yourself? You, who wanted to die for me, would be refusing to live for me! And I who need you would walk alone. . . . Don't you see what a horrible thing that would be to both of us . . . my lover?"

She leaned forward, hands clasped at her breast, and the tears swam into her eyes. She was very beautiful, very gentle and tender, but as he looked he felt rather than saw the strength that was in her: the character that had stood alone, that had been herself in the face of the loss of love and position, and that, by so standing, had triumphed.

For a breathless instant she poised so, with unsteady lips, and she saw the want come into his face, saw the old reserve, the old resolution to punish himself melt away.

"I want you, Jane!" he whispered.

The evening shadows had come before she rose from her knees and drew up a chair to sit stroking his hand.

His eyes rested on her hungrily and after a time they concentrated on the locket at her throat.

"Say! Now that you've done me the honor to give me a second chance at lovin' you, there's somethin' I want to ask."

"Ask it."

"What's in that locket?"

She laughed as she caught it in her fingers.

"My luck!"

"I understand that. It brought me luck, too, but there's something else. Won't you tell me?"

She unclasped the trinket and held it in her hand, turning it over slowly. Then she sprung the catch and held it so he could see.

Behind the disc of mica lay a piece of oat straw.

"That is the last straw," she said simply.

He did not understand.

"The one you would not draw that day, which seems so long ago!"

His face brightened.

"You kept it?"

"I clung to it as though it were . . . the last straw!"

"Why, Tom, can't you see what it has meant? If you had drawn you would have been my foreman. You would have protected me, fought for me, taken care of me. I'd never have been forced to stand alone, never been forced to try to do something for myself, by myself. Your refusal put on me the responsibility of being a woman or a leech. . . ."

"I drew the last straw that day. I drew the responsibility of keeping the H C on its feet. I feel that I have helped to do that. . . ."

"You have."

"Through sickness and through death, through dark days and storms. I have done something! I have walked alone, unaided. . . .

"And I have made you love me, Tom. . . . *That* is the biggest thing I have done. To be worthy of your love was my greatest undertaking. By being worthy, by winning you, I have justified my being here, my walking the earth, my breathing the air. . . ."

"Sho!" he cried in embarrassment, and took the locket and fingered it.

His hand dropped to the blanket and he stared upward as though a fresh idea had occurred to him.

"Say, I wonder if the Reverend was a regular preacher?" he asked.

"Why? He was a doer of good works. Why consider his actual standing?"

"Yeah. But I mean, could he marry folks, do you s'pose?"

He looked at her again and in his eyes was that amused twinkle, the laugh of a man assured, content, self sufficient . . . and behind it was the tenderness that comes to a strong man's eyes only when he looks upon the woman who has given him love for love.

"If he could he'd be glad to," he said, "and I suspect that he'd throw a little variety into the ceremony . . . something, likely, about your fightin' a good fight!"

THE END

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